

EXTRA

SCIENCE FICTION

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JAMES WHITE

*Long will live
the King*

BOB SHAW

Aliens aren't human

RICHARD COWPER

Brothers

NON FICTION

Crying Wolfe by **CHRIS EVANS**

PSF by **JOHN GRANT**

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES WHITE



IN EXTRO

VOL 1—NO 2 APRIL—MAY 1982

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Non Fiction Editor: Dave Langford

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EXTRO

We promised in the first issue that we'd present you with the very best of Science Fiction – from the established, professional writers and from writers who have been unpublished so far. We promised also that EXTRO would bring you a blend of all the various types of SF short stories.

If the mail we've received is a true reflection then, in the first issue, we were successful in our aims. Very few readers liked *everything* (we didn't expect they would) but everyone who wrote to us found much to enjoy.

One of the national dailies, reviewing EXTRO, noted that most of the fiction was pessimistic: was this a reflection of our times? We didn't take this as a criticism, so we didn't try to remedy the situation – but it just so happens that many of the stories in this issue are in lighter vein. We hope that the balance of alien/social comment/plain nutty/adventure/fantasy stories provokes as favourable a reaction as did the first issue.

We've found too that our stated intention of maintaining the balance between well known authors and previously unpublished authors meets with your enthusiastic approval. Because of the dearth of science fiction magazines in this country over the last few years, many talented young writers have been unable to find a market for their material; the vast numbers of excellent manuscripts that EXTRO has received is evidence of this talent.

EXTRO wishes to thank all those who have written in, submitting stories and articles, offering advice, criticism and assistance but, in particular, we are indebted to James White, who gave generously of his time for the interview, and Bob Shaw, who wrote *Aliens Aren't Human* specially for the magazine.

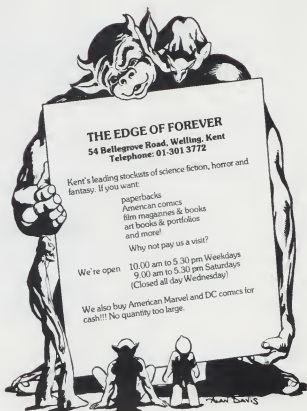
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Any other ideas? Write to EXTRO.

*

EXTRO notes with great regret the death of Philip K. Dick at his home in California in early March. No one who has read his work can doubt that Dick was one of the finest, most original writers of the last thirty years. The world of literature will miss his stimulating contributions.

VIEWS



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ALIENS AREN'T HUMAN

by Bob Shaw

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Aliens—Shaw

'What a beautiful day!' Kston said in his thin, lisping voice. **'How pleasant to be at peace with the cosmos, and to enjoy the companionship of good friends! How wonderful it is to be alive on such a day!'**

That was five seconds before the car hit him.

President Johnny Ciano, who was walking across the plaza with the little Dorrinian diplomat, saw the speeding vehicle first. It registered at the edge of his vision as a silver-blue shape which was changing its position with unusual rapidity, and the instinct for self-preservation – ever strong in his family – prompted him to check his stride. The car had swung off the street which formed the plaza's southern boundary and was hurtling between an ornamental fountain and a soft drinks stand at over a hundred, its magnetic engine emitting an angry whine.

Ciano's immediate thought was that the vehicle had gone out of control, then he made out the figure of his own cousin – Frankie Ritzo – crouched over the steering wheel, his eyes gleaming like miniature versions of the car's headlights.

The fool! Ciano thought, turning to warn Kston. The grey-skinned alien had moved ahead of him, oblivious to all danger, and was still prattling happily about the joys of existence when the car swatted him skywards in a parabola which would have cleared a large house. At the top of its trajectory his body struck the outflung arm of a bronze statue, one of a symbolic group, bending it to an unfortunate position in which its owner appeared to be fondling the left breast of the Mother of Creation. Still spinning, the alien's compact form came down on a marble bench – converting it to a heap of expensive rubble – bounced twice and rolled to a halt amid a knot of elderly female shoppers, several of whom began screaming. The car which had initiated the grotesque sequence slewed its way across the plaza and disappeared into a narrow street on the west side.

'Holy Mary,' Ciano sobbed, running towards the fallen body. **'This is terrible! Send for a priest, somebody.'**

'A priest will be no use for this job,' Kston said, springing to his feet and picking up a piece of the shattered bench. **'Unless, of course, your clergy also serve as stone-masons. Forgive this humble being for not being familiar with human ...'**

'I'm not talking about the bench,' Ciano gaped at the diplomat's grey hide which was unmarked and mir-

aculously intact.

'The statue, then,' Kston looked up at the metal sculptures. **'This humble being considers that the arrangement has been improved. It's more symbolic than ever, if you know what this humble being means.'**

'I'm talking about you,' Kston – **'I thought you were dead.'**

'Dead?' Kston closed one eye, which was his way of showing puzzlement. **'How could this humble being die while he is still young?'**

'That car was doing at least a hundred when it hit you. I don't know what you must think of us, Kston, but you can rest assured that no effort will be spared in the search for the driver. We'll find him no matter how long it takes, and when we do ...'

'But this humble being thought your cousin was joining us for lunch,' Kston said mildly.

'My cousin?' Ciano felt both his knees partake of a loose circular motion. **'You saw the driver?'**

'Yes. It was your cousin Frankie, the Secretary for External Affairs.'

Ciano stared numbly at Kston,

***'... he was
prepared to go as
far as public
execution ...'***

and then at the shoppers who had sorted themselves out and were beginning to take an interest in the conversation. **'Let's move on,'** he said hastily, his brain racing as he tried to think of a way out of the situation in which his cousin's assassination attempt had placed him. Ritzo's lack of finesse had always made him something of an embarrassment to the government of New Sicily, but with this latest piece of crassness he had become a downright liability. Ciano made up his mind that Ritzo would have to be sacrificed, that he was prepared to go as far as a public execution if it would save the top-level talks.

'Are you positive it was Secretary Ritzo?' He made a last effort to save his cousin's life. **'I mean, there are lots of cars just like that one.'**

'It was Frankie, all right,' Kston showed his slate-like teeth. **'This humble being can see why you put him in charge of External Affairs. It is rare for anybody to show such consideration for a visitor. His car obviously was not designed for playing boost-a-body, and yet he went right ahead and boosted this**

humble being. He just didn't care how much damage would be done to his vehicle ... and this humble being finds that really heart-warming. Don't you?'

'Aw ... ah,' Ciano said. Even to his own ears the comment seemed to lack incisiveness, but for the moment he was unable to improve on it.

'It's obvious that Frankie has studied Dorrinian customs and has learned that boost-a-body is one of our favourite games. It was a nice diplomatic gesture, but ...' Kston smiled his dark smile again. **'This humble being is afraid it doesn't change his mind about our heavy mineral deposits.'**

'I need a drink,' Ciano mumbled. He escorted Kston across the street and into the hotel, owned by his uncle, which had the catering contracts for the Department of Trade. They went straight into the VIP bar, a large room decorated in Earth-style traditional, complete with a high-mounted television set showing sports programmes. Ciano ordered two triple whiskies. While the drinks were being served he covertly examined the Dorrinian, whose physique could best be described as pyramidal humanoid. The grey-skinned body grew steadily wider and thicker from the top of a bald, pointed head to the short, immensely powerful legs which ended in slab-like feet. Kston was nude, but this condition was acceptable to human eyes, partly because his genitals were internal, partly because his smooth hide created the impression he was dressed in a one-piece garment of superstuff.

Ciano examined that hide carefully while sipping his drink and was unable to detect the slightest sign of lacerations or bruises resulting from impacts which would have burst a human body like a ripe tumshi fruit. He guessed that the high gravity on Kston's home world had led to the evolution of incredibly robust inhabitants; and from there his thoughts went on to the fact that Dorrin was also the only planet in the local system with an adequate supply of elements heavier than iron. Proper development of New Sicily was impossible without access to those elements, but the Dorrinians were adamant about refusing mining rights.

'Listen, Kston,' he said, adding generous quantities of warmth and sincerity to his voice, **'there must be something here on New Sicily that your people would like to have.'**

Kston blinked to signify agreement. **'Indeed yes. Sulphur in particular is prized by our chefs as a condiment, but our supplies are almost exhausted.'**

'Then we should be able to work out an exchange deal.'

'This humble being fears not. The word "exchange" implies the existence of two parties, each of which is the sole owner of a commodity.'

Ciano weighed up the comment and failed to see its point. 'Well?'

'Well, the Dorrinian viewpoint is that, as this planetary system was our home for millions of years before the first ships arrived from Earth, every resource of every planet in it automatically belongs to us.' The alien diplomat experimentally squeezed the chromed steel rail on the edge of the bar between finger and thumb, producing noticeable dents in it. 'We don't feel disposed towards trading our own property in exchange for our own property.'

'But you didn't have the necessary space technology until we gave it to you.'

'It would have been developed,' Kst0n said matter-of-factly. 'In any case, this planet is more than adequate recompense for a little technical know-how.'

Ciano smiled to conceal a pang of irritation and anger. The Dorrinian made a great show of being humble and sweetly reasonable, but underneath it he was a stubborn and bloody-minded monstrosity who deserved to be fitted with concrete boots and sent for a walk on a riverbed. The trouble was, Ciano was beginning to suspect, that were he to arrange such an excursion the alien actually would go for a submarine stroll and then come up smiling.

Taking a hefty swig of his drink, Ciano saw that Kst0n's attention had been drawn by a burst of cheering from the television set behind the bar. A heavyweight boxing match was in progress on the screen and the ringside crowd was erupting with excitement as one of the fighters, a giant in blue shorts, moved in for a devastating finish. He drove his opponent into the ropes with a flurry of body blows, stepped back and caught him on the rebound with a right cross to the chin which landed with such leathery finality that, in spite of his pre-occupations, Ciano winced in sympathy. The recipient went down on the instant, obviously unconscious before he hit the canvas, and lay like a side of bacon while the victor danced around him.

'This humble being fails to understand,' Kst0n said. 'What is happening?'

Ciano put down his empty glass. 'It's a sport we humans call boxing. The idea is to ...'

'The general idea is clear - we have a similar sport called dent-a-

body - but why is that man pretending to sleep?'

'You mean you don't ...?' Ciano was wondering how he could explain the effects of a knock-out blow to the likes of Kst0n when his thoughts were diverted to a more serious problem - namely that of staying alive. A door at the rear of the large room crashed open, there were shouts and screams of panic, and in a mirror Ciano glimpsed his cousin Frankie - the Secretary for External Affairs - brandishing a demolisher. Ciano dropped to the floor with reflexive speed and crouched there, praying and swearing with equal fervour, while the weapon created its own version of hell. Blinding laser bursts seared the air and from the gun's multiple barrels, firing at the rate of a hundred rounds a second, came sprays of high-velocity bullets - some of them explosive, some armour-piercing - converging on the sites of the laser strikes. For a brief moment Ciano saw the stubby outline of the Dorrinian at the terrible focus of the destruction - limned in radiant blue fire - then there was comparative

'Blinding laser bursts seared the air ...'

silence, the only sounds being those of tinkling glass and fleeing footsteps.

Trying to control the trembling of his limbs, Ciano struggled to stand up, already rehearsing the disclaimer he would have to issue to the news media. *I know the preliminary trade negotiations with the Dorrinian envoy were going badly, but that doesn't mean my family was involved with his assassination. We are men of honour, not ... not ...*

His thoughts dissolved into a confused blur as he saw that Kst0n was not only still on his feet, but apparently totally unharmed. The alien's grey hide was, if anything, smoother than before, and the hand with which he helped Ciano to his feet was steady. Ciano began to feel ill.

'This humble being fears that your cousin has gone too far this time,' Kst0n said.

'You're so right,' Ciano gritted. 'I promise you he'll pay for this.'

'The expense will be considerable.' Kst0n surveyed the shattered and smoking ruins of the bar coun-

ter. 'Obviously Frankie learned about the Dorrinian custom of ablate-a-body - in which a thoughtfully host refreshes a guest by scouring off the outer layer of dead skin cells - but it is usually done in special cubicles where there can be no damage to the surroundings. Perhaps your cousin got carried away in his eagerness to be hospitable.'

Ciano nodded, forcing his brain into action. 'Frankie always was the cordial type. Look, Kst0n, can we go back to my office where it's quiet and get on with the talks?'

'Of course!' Kst0n showed his dark teeth. 'This humble being can't imagine how you intend to negotiate from a position of such weakness, but he will be privileged to watch you try. Perhaps he will learn something.'

'Hope so.' Ciano spent a minute with the hotel manager, pacifying him by undertaking to foot all repair bills, then returned to his alien companion. 'Let's go - this place looks like there's been a war.'

'War? Is that your word for ablate-a-body?'

'I suppose you could say that,' Ciano replied absently, his mind filled with the need to get hold of his wayward cousin and talk to him about his activities before something went seriously wrong. Ciano had no moral objections to murdering Kst0n - in fact, the more time he spent with the obsequious little alien the more attractive the idea seemed - but New Sicily was a recently formed colony, with severely limited military resources, and dared not antagonise the heavily populated neighbouring world of Dorrin. Secretary Ritzo was fully aware of the situation, which made his failed assassinations puzzling as well as embarrassing.

As soon as they were back in the Department of Trade building Ciano handed his guest over to the care of an assistant and went looking for Ritzo. He found him slumped over the bar in his private suite, drinking imported grappa straight from the bottle, his face several shades paler than usual.

'I got the shock of my life when I saw you coming back across the square with that ... with that ...' Unable to find a suitable epithet, Ritzo again raised the bottle with a trembling hand. 'Didn't I even scratch him?'

'Just about,' Ciano said. 'Luckily for you, he enjoys being scratched.'

'I tell you, Johnny, that guy ain't human.'

'Of course he isn't human - that's what being an alien *means*! Ciano snatched the bottle from his cousin's grasp and dropped it into a



waste bin. 'And there's a couple of billion more where he comes from. Have you any idea what the Dorrinians would have done to us if by some chance you had managed to rub out their representative?'

'Nothing.'

'Precisely! And that's why you've got to... What do you mean nothing?'

A look of furtive triumph appeared on Ritzo's narrow face. 'Some egghead in my department finally managed to translate those old Dorrinian books - you know the stuff that's been gathering dust since the cultural exchange way back in '22. One of them is a history book, Johnny, and d'you know what?'

'What?'

'The Dorrinians are total pacifists. Their written history goes back about twenty thousand years and they ain't never had a war in all that time! These guys are so pacifist that they don't have no armies or navies. They don't have no weapons of any kind.'

'Maybe they don't need them.'

'That's not it, Johnny. They believe that *everything* can be settled by talking if they stick at it long enough. One of their conferences went on for over a hundred years - and that was just to decide on the height of streetlamps! We don't have that sort of time.'

Ciano nodded. 'So what do you propose?'

'A bit of old-style persuasion, is all. We send the little creep back

where he came from in a wooden box and tell the Dorrinians they're all gonna get the same treatment if they tries to interfere with our mining crews.'

'Mmmm.' Ciano stroked his jaw thoughtfully. 'Not much finesse.'

'Johnny, this is no time to go soft.'

'Softness doesn't come into it. It's just that we have Kston here and we can talk to him. I think it would be better to make our intentions clear, then send him back to spread the word.'

'I guess you're right.' Ritzo's

***'... we will drop
thermonuclear
bombs on your
cities ...'***

reluctant expression gave way to one of relief. 'I was gonna try him with a bomb next, but it might have taken a tactical nuke.'

As the sole representative of his planet, Kston had one side of the long conference table to himself. Opposite him were Ciano and Ritzo, accompanied by six other members of New Sicily's ruling family, including the hulking form of Mario Vicenzi, Secretary for War. The broad smile with which he faced the group indicated that, far from feel-

ing overwhelmed, Kston was enjoying the prospect of a tough negotiating session.

'This humble being is flattered by the presence of so many illustrious humans, and he will do his utmost to justify the honour,' he said. 'Now that formal talks are about to begin, I propose that New Sicily should make a detailed presentation of its proposals. Twenty days should be sufficient for that phase of the talks, but I will not object to your taking longer as long as I am permitted equal time for my preliminary rejection of all your suggestions. As soon as each side has stated its position we can allocate, say, 20 days for debate on each point that we...'

'Pardon me for interrupting,' Ciano said firmly, 'but we're not going to bother with all that time-wasting crap.'

Kston's smile faded. 'Crap? This humble being doesn't understand.'

'I'll explain. Starting tomorrow, we are going to send mining equipment and crews to your planet and we're going to take all the minerals we need. And if anybody tries to stop us we will drop thermonuclear bombs on your cities and large numbers of your people will be vapourised.'

'Vapourised?' Kston gazed solemnly into Ciano's eyes. 'You mean they would be... dead?'

'Very.' Ciano felt an uncharacteristic twinge of pity as he noted the stunned expression on Kston's face. 'You can't *get* any more dead than they would be.' To his left the

Fiction

Secretary for War made an involuntary growling sound.

'But this is unfair! Unethical! If you are really prepared to do such a thing there is no point at all in discussing, debating, conferring, negotiating ...'

'That's what we like about our system,' Ciano put in. 'Now, do you agree to give us unlimited mining rights?'

'This humble being has no other option,' Kst0n said faintly, rising to his feet. 'This has been a great shock – twenty thousand years of tradition swept away in a few seconds – but this humble being will return to his people immediately and explain the new situation.'

'There's no need to go this very minute,' Ciano stood up too, wishing the little alien had turned nasty instead of accepting the ultimatum so meekly. 'After all, now that we understand each other there's no reason why we can't go on being good friends. Stay and share a bottle of wine with us while your ship is being readied.'

'Perhaps that is a good idea.' Kst0n summoned up a tremulous smile. 'This humble being should try to get *something* out of the agreement.'

Ciano and Ritzo led the laughter which greeted the alien's remark. Amid a sudden hubbub of good cheer the group, some of whom were slapping Kst0n's back, moved to the refreshments table at the end of the conference room. Red wine was decanted in generous quantities and somebody conjured up appropriately festive music.

'That went off easier than I expected,' Ciano whispered to Ritzo. 'I've never seen anybody cave in so fast.'

'That's the way them Dorrinians is made,' Ritzo said contemptuously. 'I told you, fighting is unknown to them. They ain't got the spunk for it. No manliness. No pride. Watch this.'

'Maybe you should leave well enough alone.' Ciano tried to restrain his cousin, but was too late to prevent him sauntering over to Kst0n with a condescending grin.

'I drink a toast to eternal friendship,' Ritzo said with an insulting lack of sincerity, raising his glass.

'To eternal friendship,' Kst0n replied submissively, raising his glass.

'My little grey *amico*!' Ritzo belatedly, wine glistening on his chin as he gave Kst0n a resounding slap on the back.

'My large pink *amico*!' Kst0n lifted his free hand and, before Ciano could react to the sudden clamour of alarms in his head, used it to slap

Ritzo's back. The effect was instantaneous and dramatic. The force of the blow, in addition to snapping Ritzo's spine, propelled him across the room and into a sickening impact with a marble column which became liberally smeared with blood as he slid down it. To all but one of the assembly it was obvious that Ritzo was dead.

'Why is my friend Frankie lying on the floor?' Kst0n piped, breaking the abrupt silence which had descended.

Secretary Vicenzi knelt beside the body and prodded it tentatively, then looked up at Kst0n with an ominous coldness in his yellowish eyes. 'Because you killed him.'

'Killed him! But that is impossible. All this humble being did was ...' Kst0n stared at his hand in perplexity for a moment, then raised his gaze to take in the intent group of humans. There was a look of dawning wonderment in his pebble-like eyes, a look which produced an icy sensation of dread in Ciano's gut.

'We take you to our bosoms as a trusted friend,' Vicenzi rumbled, rising to his feet as he slid his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. 'And this is how you repay us!'

'But this humble being can't believe that humans can be so frail,' Kst0n said, almost to himself. 'You are so big, so aggressive that one naturally assumes ...'

'I'll show you aggressive,' Vicenzi interrupted as he produced an antique bone-handled cut-throat razor, a favourite weapon from his early days, and advanced on Kst0n. 'I will also show you the colour of your own liver.'

'That would be most interesting,' Kst0n said politely. 'But first this humble being must conduct a small experiment.' Moving with frightening speed, he grasped Vicenzi's lapels in his left hand, pulling the big man down to his own level, and slapped sideways with his right. There was an immediate fountaining of blood and something heavy struck the wall, bounced off and rolled underneath the conference table. Ciano, who had closed his eyes, knew without being told that it was Vicenzi's head, a conclusion which was verified by the hoarse cries of dismay from the remaining onlookers.

He also understood, belatedly and with a terrible clarity, that he and Ritzo and the others had made a lethal error of judgment concerning the Dorrinians. Men had been partial to the use of violence ever since the first distant ancestor had used a club to settle a dispute, but there had been one necessary underlying condition – among mankind violence *worked*. There were, thanks to

design deficiencies in the human physique, dozens of quick and comparatively simple ways in which a critic or an opponent could be rendered silent and ineffective, either temporarily or permanently. It was natural therefore that the more pragmatic of the species should exploit the situation, but the Dorrinians – as Ciano has observed – were virtually indestructible. Far back in their history individuals had probably experimented with clubs, knives and bullets, found them totally ineffective, and in consequence had been forced to accept that the only way to resolve differences was by means of discussion.

From Ciano's point of view the sudden insight was cause for deep anxiety, but there was an even more disturbing factor to consider. Over the millennia man had developed a thing called a conscience, that inner voice which tempered his urge to kill off all who displeased him, thus making it possible for even the most violent to live in association with their fellows. Kst0n, however, was like a child who was enraptured with a brand-new plaything ...

'I've been thinking things over, Kst0n,' Ciano announced, trying to keep his voice steady. 'It occurs to me that we have been unreasonable in our demands – I think it only fair that we should have further talks.'

'This humble being has also been thinking things over, and he has an even better idea,' Kst0n said, tossing Vicenzi's body into a far corner of the room. 'My people can have as much sulphur as they want from this world – all this humble being has to do is kill the humans who would try to object. It's so *simple*.'

'You can't do that,' Ciano said, his mouth going dry.

'No? Watch this.' In a single blurring movement Kst0n sprang at the two men nearest him, leaping high to bring him above their shoulders and striking down on their heads with both fists. They dropped to the floor with concave skulls impacted into their collar bones.

'What I mean,' Ciano mumbled, cowering back, 'is that even if you killed everybody in this room you wouldn't have gained anything. There will always be others to take our places. I mean, there's a whole city out there ... with thousands and thousands of human settlers in it ... and you would have to kill every one of them.'

'But, Johnny! That's exactly what this humble being intends to do!' Smiling his dark grey smile, the black cabochons of his eyes gleaming with ingenuous pleasure, the Dorrinian envoy went to work.



Long will live the King

by James White

The throne-room was vast, the empty throne itself a golden speck glowing against the sombre background drapes. Diminishing perspective made a blood red pyramid of the processional carpet, which seemed to stretch for miles. Tate thought that a moving way would have been easier on his suddenly shaky legs, but that would have been an offence against tradition. Thirty-seven times he'd gone through this, and a lot of traditions had grown in those four hundred odd years, traditions which he needed to uphold. Especially as this time might be his last.

He couldn't win forever.

You're getting old, Tate told himself wryly as he stepped across the threshold, then everything else was driven from his mind as the fanfare crashed out and Harwood went into his eulogy. Tate felt his scalp begin to prickle in spite of himself; the Court Psychologist was good.

'... Emperor of the Dominions of Myra; the Protectorates, Dependencies, and Mandated Territories of Fomulhaut, of Cregennsil, and of Dubh; Lord of the Magellanic Hosts ...'

Stern and declamatory, the voice reached into the very bones. Subsonics were responsible for that effect, just as the subtle use of thought amplification put the non-humans in the audience chamber into a similar state of suggestion. As a result, the long and imposing catalogue of titles sounded neither flamboyant nor exaggerated, but a true and stirring account of his powers and achievements. According to Harwood, the star-clouds of Andromeda were a saintly nimbus around his brow, and in his strong hands he held the life and destiny of every intelligent being in the Empire.

The Court Psychologist's voice became sterner yet with the implication that those mighty hands could punish as well as protect, then softened as it went on: '... Saviour of Helgach; Defender of ...'

Helgach, Tate thought as he paced outwardly calm and unafraid between twin rows of beings who bowed low as his passing – or if physically incapable of that form of obeisance, twisted or twitched their respect in some other way. It had happened 200 years ago, but he still felt guilty about Helgach. And he would feel much worse about it in a few minutes. It was a terrible thing to wipe out a race, to cut the teeming population of a planet down to a mere handful, but he had done just that.

The population of Helgach had been close to four billions. Less than 2,000 had survived, thanks to his direct, forceful, and blindly stupid handling of the situation. Now, as befitted the representative of his most fanatically loyal system, Helgach's ambassador occupied a coveted position four yards from the throne.

The great voice filling the chamber began to quicken, and Tate was aware that he had almost reached the throne. He made the traditional pause to enquire of the Helgachian ambassador the number of that worthy's offspring, then he

mounted the low dais and turned.

'... The Just, the All-powerful, the All-knowing, His Celestial Majesty, Tate the First!'

He sat down.

No creature moved, anywhere. This was no ordinary function, where he granted audiences or issued the decrees which could alter the destiny of whole stellar systems. This was the time when he had to prove his fitness to rule, or die. In utter silence he pressed one of the two studs set in the arm of his throne, and tried to relax as golden bands of beautifully-worked metal closed around his limbs, chest, and head, holding him rigid.

Craig, his Chief Advisor, moved quickly to face him; Craig the ascetic, the intellectual, and almost, the fanatic. The young man's mouth was a stern and silent line, his features carefully neutral, but he was trying to say so much with his eyes that Tate had to look away. Craig was also Heir Apparent.

As he thought of the mass of electronic equipment hidden by the drapery behind the throne, with its point of focus his rigidly-held head, Tate felt vaguely uneasy. It was so sensitive, so delicate; so many things could go wrong. Just how badly did Craig want to be immortal. Could the other be so stupid as to think ...?

But no – Craig had trained hard for just the merest chance of attaining kingship, and must certainly know that there were no short-cuts. Disgusted with himself, Tate forced the suspicion out of his mind. That sort of thing invariably happened before a treatment. It was a mental stalling for time, and he would have to curb that failing or soon find himself backing out. Not too obtrusively, he pressed the second button on his chair-arm. Immediately, Craig turned.

'The King,' he said gravely, 'is dead.'

Before he'd finished speaking, Tate was fighting for his life.

When given before the age of 40 and renewed every 20 years, the Immortality Treatment prevented the disease of senility and death from occurring in life based on the carbon series of compounds – which meant practically all forms of life. There were thousands of dogs, cats, and monkeys to prove that it worked. But in beings of high intelligence – human or otherwise – it did not work at all, unless the being in question was mentally very, very tough.

The radiation which stimulated the regenerative centres produced other effects as well, some of them good, others quite fatally bad. The treatment increased the IQ, and gave to the mind a perfect, eidetic memory. It also, for the few seconds duration of the treatment, so intensified the effect of what had come to be called the 'area of conscience' that any being having sufficient intelligence to base his actions on a moral code had to take three seconds of the most frightful psychological torture ever known. He had to live with the cruel, debased, and utterly nauseous creature that was himself.

Many preferred to die rather than take three

Long will live—White

seconds of it. Most had no such choice – their life-force was obliterated with the first, savage blast of self-knowledge.

This secondary effect of the treatment was experienced as a complete re-living of the past, with each incident diamond-shaped in visual, auditory, and tactile sense recall. But not only that. The mind was given a terrifying insight into the end results of that being's most trivial-seeming actions. Unthinking words or gestures made over the years and forgotten, when blown up by the triple stimulus of perfect memory, increased I.Q., and a hyper-sensitive 'conscience' became lethal as a suicide's bullets. The mind just could not take such an overwhelming blast of self-guilt, even for three seconds, so it, and the body containing it, died.

Only one person had successfully undergone the Immortality Treatment.

Tate, though he had lived – with 37 previous treatments – for 768 years, still took only three seconds. And there was no blurring or telescoping of events. Each incident was complete, and though it occupied only micro-seconds of time, each bore its charge of guilt potential.

Tate had been lucky in his early years. Working constantly with his father on the circum-Pluto biological lab, his life had been one bright, long dream of helping Mankind towards its destiny – and he had somehow escaped doing too many of the things which he might have suffered for later. That shining altruism remained after his father had discovered and administered the first Immortality Treatment to him and his increased I.Q. enabled him to co-ordinate the development of the hyper-drive which gave Man the stars. It was dulled considerably when his father and a large number of other eminent men died while undergoing the Treatment, but it grew quickly bright again.

A solitary immortal man was in a peculiarly good position to make his dreams become reality.

Seven Treatments and 142 years later, when the first wave of Earth colonists impinged on a non-human civilisation, he was able to avert what looked like certain war. Ten years later the Earth was part of a Federation embracing five solar systems, and he was its chief advisor. When the Federation grew to eight, ten, then fifteen solar systems, he decided that something stronger than a President was needed to keep the unwieldy mass from falling apart. There were surprisingly few objections when he created himself Emperor, and the Federation his Empire.

Then, in his 402nd year, had come Helgach.

He had meant it to be a great and magnificent gesture – a miracle of co-operation and co-ordination that should bind the Empire even more tightly together. But the denizens of Helgach were subtly different from the octopoids inhabiting similar worlds within the Empire, and he should have realised that. But he'd had to act so quickly...

Tate re-lived the mad dash at the head of the greatest fleet of starships ever known to the Helgach system, the shock tactics which tore the natives from their homes and cities before they half-realised that anything was amiss, and he felt again the almost palpable hatred that struck him because there had been no time to explain. And he felt proud – justifiably, he thought – at his getting the last of the Helgachians away before their suddenly unstable sun blew itself up. But his too-perfect memory was bringing back things which he should have noticed; small indications which could have averted the disaster to follow. If he hadn't been so busy patting himself on the back he might have suspected that the suspended animation tanks were not perfectly suited to their alien occupants, and he would not have arrived at New Helgach – after a trip across the galaxy – with a fleet filled with decomposing corpses.

Few indeed were the Helgachians who survived to re-populate their new planet. It was, therefore, much more than politeness that made him enquire the number of the native ambassador's sons.

Tate was sorry about Helgach, desperately sorry. But that did not ease the crushing sense of guilt he felt over it. And each time he went through a treatment, that killing pressure returned in full force. The murdered population of a world rose up and cried for his blood. In previous treatments he had barely held his agony-torn mind together, and his luck, he knew, couldn't last. One of these times – maybe *this* time – he would prove that he was only a mortal man after all.

To live forever you had to fight for life. Tate had long-term plans and projects which he desperately wanted to see to completion. They, together with the other more or less good things he had already done, kept the ripped and tattered rag that was his mind in one piece. But he was getting tired of the struggle – tired, and terribly, achingly lonely. His constantly increasing I.Q. cut him off from all other beings, though he pretended that it didn't, and made it so frighteningly easy to be cruel through sheer thoughtlessness. And those thoughtless acts had to be paid for at the next Treatment, and with a shocking rate of interest.

There were other things, but Helgach was the worst. Helgach was a white-hot spear that stabbed and gouged at his mind, then returned to stab again. In vain he writhed and screamed in mental agony for it to stop, that it hadn't been his fault and he had been acting for the best. It was always there. Four billion beings dead. Through negligence. His.

Suddenly his thoughts seemed to dissolve and fly apart, then slowly and painlessly to collect themselves and trickle back into his brain. Tate opened his eyes.

'The King is dead,' his Chief Advisor was repeating; then triumphantly, '*Long Live the King!*'

Fiction

Craig turned, beaming widely, but with concern and sympathy in his eyes. The crowd and the royal trumpeters were making it impossible for his voice to be heard; he mouthed, 'You'll be told officially later. Two Helgachians have successfully undergone Immortality Treatment!'

Somehow Tate endured an hour of congratulations and renewed vows of loyalty, but his mind was far away. If two non-humans could become immortal, he told himself, then everyone could do it. He *must* live on now, because the news meant two things: he was no longer alone, and the dream he had had for centuries looked like coming about. He sighed and had to blink his eyes.

These trappings of Royalty and Empire that were necessary to hold the variegated and often quarrelsome children of the galaxy together would soon become superfluous. The children were slowly growing up. One day their ethical standards would be so high that they would have nothing to fear from the Treatment, and the galaxy would at last be populated with truly civilised beings. Meanwhile, if Tate expected to see

that day, he would have to live the life of a saint, and be very very careful not to do any of the petty little things which could so easily kill him during treatment. He *had* to live now.

He came fully out of his daydream only as he was leaving the great audience chamber. The trumpeters were having a wonderful time, and almost drowning out the din of whistling, chirping, and cheering from the beings in the room. Somewhere, someone began to chant. Quickly others took it up. It became thunderous, ground-shaking. The last great fanfare paled into insignificance.

'Long Live the King!'

Tate, the Wise, Merciful, Just, and well-loved Father whose benevolent tyranny forced a galaxy to live together in peace, nodded once gravely in acknowledgement. 'Yes,' he said softly, 'long will live the King!'

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A version of this story, in substantially different form, appeared in Science Fantasy in September 1955.

The Science Fiction of James White

Stars and

Scalpels

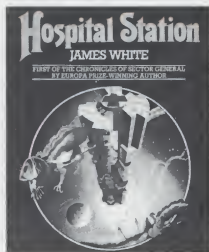
Interview by Graham Andrews

Medicine is one of the few disciplines that demand a high correlation of scientific data with just about everything that qualifies as being 'human', therefore it is a very popular sf theme. Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of authors who are able to combine accurate medical knowledge with the ability to create memorable human – or inhuman! – characters.

L. Ron Hubbard (as 'Rene Lafayette') wrote a number of workmanlike stories between 1947–50 for *Astounding Science Fiction* based on a star-

hopping medic named Ole Doc Methuselah, and Murray Leinster initiated an equivalent series in the mid-1950s about a certain Doctor Calhoun and his 'being', Murgatroyd. More significantly,

Alan E. Nourse – an American physician turned part-time sf author – has produced such prime exemplars of the sub-genre as *The Mercy Men* (1968) and *The Bladerunner* (1974).



James White

However, the medical themes in most of the above-named stories seem rudimentary when compared to the prolific inventiveness displayed in the works of James White, especially in his wildly successful 'Sector General' series.

Sector Twelve General Hospital – to give 'Sector General' its full title – is a huge multi-environmental hospital situated 'far out on the galactic Rim'. Its 384 levels accurately reproduce the multifarious environments of the 69 life forms currently known to the Galactic Federation – a bizarre 'biological spectrum' ranging from the ultra-frigid methane breathers through the more 'normal' oxygen-and-chlorine-breathing types up to the exotic beings who exist by the direct conversion of hard radiation.

There is, of course, much more to the sf of James White than the fundamental 'space opera-ish' shenanigans of 'Sector General'. Nevertheless, the series presents his refreshingly humanitarian (or should that be 'xenotarian'?) philosophy in virtually simon-pure form. It provides us with a pleasant antidote to the dire 'shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later' school of sf writing.

James White was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on 7th April 1928, although he spent much of his early life in Canada. His family returned to Belfast, where he became assistant manager of a large tailoring firm, and – later – a publicity officer with the aircraft firm Short Brothers, Ltd. He began reading 'modern' science fiction in 1941 and also met the noted Irish fan Walt Willis the same year.

Together, they were to help produce two of the most distinctive and influential of all British fanzines: *Slant* (1948–53) and *Hyphen* (1952–65). Both fanzines contained superb pieces of humorous writing, and featured fiction by such now well-established authors as Kenneth Bulmer, John Brunner and fellow Ulsterman Bob Shaw.

According to James White, he 'cut his literary teeth' on the works of such mainstream writers as C. S. Forester, Jeffrey Farnol, Rafael Sabatini, and H. G. Wells:

'I was particularly influenced by the novels of H. G. Wells – especially the early 'scientific romances' such as *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *The First Men in the Moon*. At first I read them purely as adventure stories, then I gradually became aware of the deep philosophical sub-stratum which underlies the futuristic trappings. Also, Wells' prose contains some of the most evocative imagery in English literature. Who could forget his spell-binding word-picture of the dying Earth in *The Time*

Machine?

Apart from Wells, the mainstream writer who did most to help shape the literary consciousness of the young James White was C. S. Forester:

'The "Hornblower" novels fascinated me. They were so steeped in technical detail that I was flabbergasted when I later discovered that Forester himself was not a particularly keen sailor. Forester taught me a lot about the art of good, straight-forward story telling. As a matter of fact, the "Hornblower" series could very easily be transposed into a science-fictional setting – as A. Bertram Chandler has found to his profit and our enjoyment!'

1941, the year in which James White first came across science fiction 'proper', was part of the so-called 'Golden Age' of magazine sf.



In fact, the dozen years between 1938 and 1950 were dominated by one exceptional magazine – *Astounding Science Fiction* (now *Analog*), edited by that controversial 'father of modern sf', John W. Campbell. During 1941 alone, *Astounding* featured such famous novels as *Methusalem's Children* by Robert A. Heinlein and *Second Stage Lensman* by E. E. 'Doc' Smith, plus the classic short stories 'Microcosmic God' by Theodore Sturgeon and 'The Seesaw' by A. E. van Vogt.

'E. E. "Doc" Smith opened my eyes to the fact that there could be good aliens as well as evil ones, while Heinlein demonstrated that it is, after all, possible to write "hard" sf stories which centre around quite ordinary people. From that point on, I became an inveterate reader of sf. I tried hard to complete my collection of *Astounding* – a daunting task, but

I eventually succeeded.'

Nevertheless, the youthful James White had no particular yen to become a writer – that came about much later, almost by 'accident'. From 1948 onwards, his artistic energies were directed toward producing woodcut illustrations for that 'labour of love', the fanzine *Slant*. There was only one fly in the ointment:

'Too much competition!' – especially from Gerard Quinn, who went on to become a frequent cover and interior artist for such British magazines as *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy*, and *Nebula*.

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. James White decided to become a science fiction writer, and – with his usual thoroughness – he began researching the available markets. He had always retained his love for *Astounding*, but that magazine had by then passed its zenith.

'*Astounding* had fallen into a thematic rut. John W. Campbell was riding the then-fashionable hobby horse of atomic doom. Every other story seemed to be a post-Holocaust disaster epic, with the human race reduced to pre-technological barbarism and menaced by malignant "mutants" – usually with a contrived downbeat ending.'

The British market at that time was in a state of rapid flux – in every sense of the word 'flux'. Catchpenny publishers such as Curtis Warren, Scion Books and their ilk were cashing in on the lucrative post-war paperback boom. Cheapjack magazines with titles like *Futuristic Science Stories* and *Tales of Tomorrow* lurked in the pulp undergrowth. Thankfully, however, there was *New Worlds*...

New Worlds turned out to be the most successful of all British sf magazines, publishing 201 issues over a chequered career stretching across thirty-odd years. Three issues had been brought out during the period 1946–47, under the editorship of a dedicated fan named John Carnell. Nova Publications – a publishing house formed by the British sf fans who then frequented the White Horse pub (in London) – revived *New Worlds* in 1949. Carnell was to remain at the helm until 1964, and during his long tenure he developed a reliable 'stable' of British sf writers.

James White was, of course, destined to become a first-magnitude star in the *New Worlds* constellation. But way back in 1952 he had still to make that critical 'quantum jump' from fanzine contributor to professional author:

'I thought long and hard before deciding which story I should submit to which magazine. Carnell's

Interview

New Worlds seemed to be my best bet, so I concentrated on breaking into that particular market. After considering several different approaches, I finally decided to "do my own thing" and write the kind of story that I most liked to read. The result was a piece of deathless prose allusively entitled "Assisted Passage".

John Carnell was notoriously hard on "his" writers. He was never one to dish out false praise – or even "true" praise, for that matter. Being accepted by Carnell was sometimes a more traumatic experience than being rejected!

In the case of "Assisted Passage", he waxed eloquent concerning my then somewhat unorthodox syntax and other grammatical deficiencies. Apparently, I had spelt the word "manoeuvre" three different ways – all of them wrong!

Sometimes he completely missed the point of stories, the most blatant example in my own case being the novella "Second Ending" which was eventually serialised in *Fantastic* (June–July, 1961) and subsequently published in book form by Ace (1962). It was – essentially – a "last-man-in-the-world" story, but Carnell urged me to introduce an enclave of surviving humanity, in order to provide an "optimistic" ending! Incidentally, "Second Ending" was short-listed for a Hugo in 1962, but something called *Stranger in a Strange Land* actually won the award that year. The author's name escapes me at the moment. . . .

Nevertheless, John Carnell had a stimulating effect upon British sf of the fifties and early sixties – not only in *New Worlds*, but in its companion magazines, *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures*. But he was not a "creative" editor in the Campbellian mould – rather, he served as a common centre of gravity around which orbited an entire "generation" of British sf writers. For in those days, Carnell's "family" of magazines was virtually "the only game in town".

Emboldened by his first-time-out success with 'Assisted Passage', James White set himself the seemingly chimerical goal of breaking into the American market, via his childhood 'sweetheart', *Astounding Science Fiction*. Arthur C. Clarke's classic novelette 'Rescue Party' (*Astounding* May '46) inspired him to construct a story based on the following premise:

'Sometimes a civilization has got to be rescued – whether it wants to or not!'

Clarke was approached for permission to use this 'spin-off' notion, and he graciously consented. The completed story was entitled 'The

Scavengers'. It was duly submitted to *Astounding*, and – wonder of wonders! – it met with immediate acceptance.

However, 'one swallow doesn't make a summer', and John W. Campbell rejected the next twelve James White stories to be submitted to him:

'Judging from Campbell's idiosyncratic "personalized" rejection slips, it was his literally cosmic xenophobia that militated against me. For instance, 'Tableau' (*New Worlds* May '58) was summarily rejected by Campbell because of its uncompromising anti-war sentiments.'

Another major breakthrough came in 1957, whenever the American paperback publishers, Ace Books, brought out his debut novel, *The Secret Visitors*. It was bound back-to-back (in the old 'Ace Double' format) with an early Robert Sil-



verberg novel entitled *Master of Life and Death*. Although he now tends to shy away from discussing this fledgling effort, it is – by any reasonable standards – an above-average first novel.

The Secret Visitors had previously appeared as a three-part serial in *New Worlds* (October–December '56), under the somewhat unprepossessing title of 'Tourist Planet'. The book is unique in at least one respect – it was the first sf novel to utilize Northern Ireland locations, however briefly! But once again James White fell 'victim' to editorial interference:

'Donald A. Wollheim – who was then the sf editor at Ace Books – thought that the original ending of "Tourist Planet"/*The Secret Visitors* was too "tame". He "suggested" that I insert some scenes depicting a slam-bang space battle immediately after the climactic

courtroom scene, and I bowed to his superior wisdom. After all, "he who pays the piper calls the tune"!'

1957 turned out to be something of a 'red letter' year in James White's burgeoning literary career. Apart from the American publication of his first novel, he also had several stories printed in *New Worlds*: 'Patrol' (January); 'The Lights Outside the Windows' (February); and 'False Alarm' (July). Above and beyond all this, however, 1957 also marked the inception of a series which has since become his 'trademark':

'"Sector General" was the title of a 17,000 word novelette which I submitted to John Carnell late in 1957. It was purely a "one-off" story – I had no intention of using it as a "springboard" for a series. Like Topsy, it "just grewed"! In any event, its publication in the November 1957 issue of *New Worlds* was the result of a technical fluke.

In Carnell's not-so-humble opinion, the plotting of 'Sector General' was downright dreadful. His first reaction was to send the story straight back to me for a drastic rewrite job. However, his second reaction was to buy the story, because the upcoming November issue had sprung a 17,000 word "hole" which needed to be filled, *tout suit*!

Nevertheless, Carnell *did* like the "Sector General" concept itself, and he quickly asked for more stories in the same "vein" (!?). And the rest, as they say, is history. . . .

'Ace Books had originally planned to publish a "Sector General" collection as part of a "Double" package, but they decided not to bother. But "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good", because Ballantine Books soon stepped into the breach. Ballantine was then – as it is now! – a much more "prestigious" company than Ace, and Betty Ballantine, in particular, had a very strong feeling for sf. It also made British publishers sit up and take notice – hence my long and profitable association with Corgi.'

By the middle 1960s, traditional genre sf had reached a crisis point – on both sides of the Atlantic. The time seemed ripe for a certain amount of experimentation, and that is exactly what happened. When Michael Moorcock took over the editorship of *New Worlds* from John Carnell in mid-1964, he almost immediately turned it into a rallying point for practitioners of what – rightly or wrongly – came to be known as 'New Wave' sf.

'My initial reaction to the New Wave was – unquestionably – adverse. I have no objection to experimental writing *per se*, but I had the distinct impression that

James White

some of those authors ("no names, no pack drill") were "having me on". J. G. Ballard's novel *The Crystal World* (1966) was, to my mind, the best of the bunch. It possessed an almost hallucinatory vividness, reminding me of the time when I came down with a bad case of German Measles. . . .

In any case, the New Wave was a purely temporary phenomenon, and – for the most part – it was "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Nevertheless, some of its after-effects were undoubtedly beneficial. It helped bring *real* characterization into genre sf, and – of course – it pioneered "Inner Space" (or "psychological sf", if you prefer).

Of the many excellent novels which James White has written since his 'journeyman' effort, *The Secret Visitors*, three stand out for special attention: *The Watch Below*, *All Judgement Fled*, and *The Dream Millennium*.

Although James White is now primarily a novelist, he has not yet completely forsaken the short story form. Over the last twenty-odd years he has produced such exceptional stories as: 'Grapeliner' (*New Worlds* November '59); 'Deadly Litter' (*Science Fiction Adventures* February '60); 'Commuter' (*New Writings* in SF 21 '73); and the Hugo Award nominee, 'Custom Fitting' (*Stellar* No. 2 '76).

James White has matured into the 'complete professional', who automatically reaches a basic level of competence which many other sf writers strive to emulate but seldom equal. He is a master of the subtly simple, well-wrought tale, with strong plots and plausibly motivated, no-nonsense characters. Above all, his aliens are *really* alien – not just biological freaks with human mentalities and over-human thought patterns.

I am more concerned with the characters' reactions to the plot than the actual plot itself. Of course, the plot idea must come first – but the characters soon "take over". Some authors – Bob Shaw, for example – always know where the story is going at any given stage. But I prefer to give my characters more leeway, allowing the story to evolve from their individual natures. You might say that Bob Shaw uses a map to show where he is going, while I use a compass.

In order to hold the reader's attention, any story must have *conflict* – which means that it must incorporate physical or emotional violence of some description. But if a writer (like myself!) loathes violence and is convinced that killers – no matter what their ostensible "cause" – are morally disqualified

from receiving sympathetic treatment in a story, he faces immediate difficulties. Avoiding these difficulties was the main reason why so many of the protagonists in my stories are medics.

'The violence in a "medical" sf story comes about as the logical consequence of a natural catastrophe – Lester del Rey's *Nerves* (Ballantine '56: magazine version in *Astounding* September '42) is a good case in point. But if there is a war situation in such a story, then the leading characters are fighting to save lives – as in my "Sector General" novel *Star Surgeon* – and doctors and nurses do not as a rule admire the "heroes" on either side who are creating so much medical repair work for them.'

Not everyone appreciates this contemplative brand of sf, though, and James White has been subjected to much adverse criticism



from readers who prefer to have their vicarious violence served up 'raw'. But he views such scurrilous attacks with philosophical detachment:

'I usually respond well to editorial criticism, and I invariably take notice of a constructive review. Generally speaking, however, those people who like my stories show great sensitivity and intelligence – those who don't, don't.'

'Modern' science fiction is in a state of whirlwind change – naturally enough, since sf is the *literature* of change. Many learned critics have argued that sf has developed to such an extent that to describe it as a genre – while it is a convenient 'shorthand' for librarians, booksellers, and the mass media – is essentially meaningless. Science (and/or 'speculative') fiction has – we are told – finally 'come of age' and its pulpish past is something which has

got to be 'lived down'.

Be that as it may, there will always be room for the unpretentious teller of tales – the 'taller' the better. And James White will no doubt further consolidate his well-established position as a professional yarn-spinner. 'The one fixed point in a changing age'? Hardly!

I would very much like to develop "Federation World" (*Analogue* August '81) and "The Scourge" (*Analogue* January '82) into a continuing saga similar to – but nonetheless different from – my "Sector General" series. The hospital staff at "Sector General" are primarily concerned with deducing the *medical* background of a particular alien in order to treat him, her, or "it". In the projected "Federation World" series, however, I'd delve more deeply into the *cultural* ethos of the aliens concerned.

The manifold difficulties of establishing meaningful communication with extraterrestrial beings have always intrigued me. Murray Leinster's classic short story, "First Contact" (*Astounding* May '45), profoundly affected my thinking on this vexed subject. Treating sick aliens is, in itself, all very well and good – but what kind of worlds do they come from? What makes their societies "tick"?

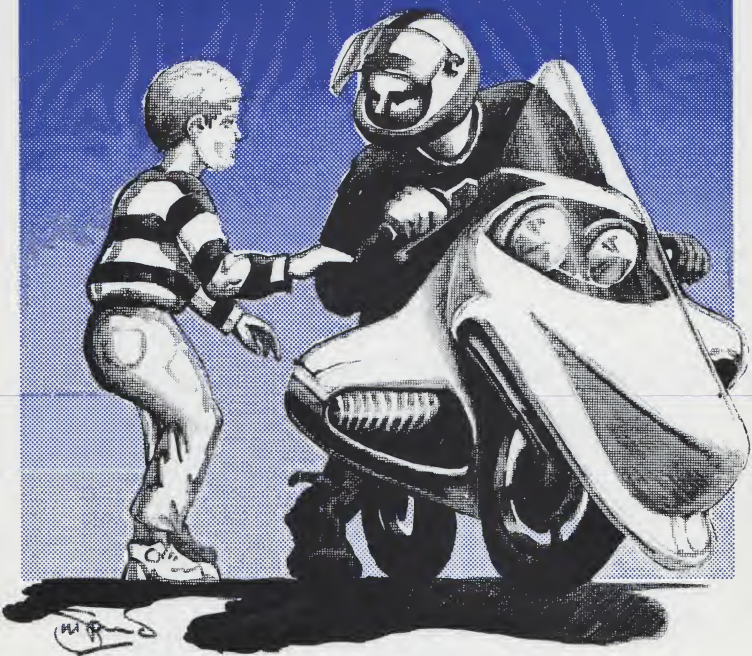
'Looking *really* far into the future, I'll eventually start work on what should turn out to be my *magnum opus* – a love story which is set against the complex background of an alternate universe. It can best be described as a science fictional *Gone With the Wind* – in scope, if not in content! The basic situation could never take place in "our" universe, and I hope to demonstrate – once and for all – that love transcends mere physical appearances.'

James White has always maintained close links with sf fandom, and this 'gentle giant' is a familiar figure at most British – and some European! – conventions. In fact, he attended his first British Easterncon way back in 1951 (it was held in London, and dubbed the 'Festivation' – for obvious reasons). He is a long-serving Council Member of the British Science Fiction Association, and – along with Harry Harrison and Anne McCaffrey – a Patron of its Irish counterpart, the ISFA.

Unfortunately, James White has been suffering from a serious eye complaint for some little time now, and – in consequence – his literary output has been substantially curtailed. But even though the *quantity* of his writing may have diminished, its high *quality* has remained constant. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that 'normal service' will be resumed as soon as possible'.

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BROTHERS



by Richard Cowper

Brothers—Cowper

The coach was late. Tammy and I had been waiting in the pool of shade beneath Marker Oak for the better part of an hour when we saw old Mr. Dorian plodding down the road towards us driving two heifers. I called out to ask him what time it was.

'Lo, Roger,' he said. 'Lo, young Tammy. Bus late agin, is she?'

'What time is it, please, Mr. Dorian?'

He fumbled inside his jacket, pulled out an ancient digital timeteller by means of the bootlace which he kept fastened to it, and squinted down. The heifers gazed at us with their huge, mild eyes, and breathed softly through their moist pink noses. 'Half past three, I make her,' said Mr. Dorian. 'Meeting someone, are you?'

'Bobby's coming home on leave today,' said Tammy.

'Is that so?' said Mr. Dorian. 'Home on leave, eh? Don't seem no time since he went away.'

'Fifteen months,' I said. 'All but a week.'

'Is that so? As long as that, eh? And how long is he home for?'

'Seven days,' I said.

One of the heifers arched its tail and poured a liquid sploodge into the grey dust of the roadway. Mr. Dorian restored his timeteller to its pocket, nodded to us, and prodded the animals into movement. 'I dare say you won't have much longer to wait,' he said. 'Bye f'now.'

We watched him till he disappeared from our sight down the lane that led towards the river, then I climbed up on to the dry-stone wall, shaded my eyes from the August glare and peered down the valley.

Far off where the blue hills folded in upon each other I glimpsed a sudden bright flicker as the sun's reflection winked from a distant windscreen. 'There's something coming!' I called.

'Is it him?'

'Too far to tell.'

Tammy scrambled up beside him. 'Where?' she demanded.

I pointed towards the distant hills and she screwed up her eyes. I could just make out the faint plume of white dust but she had no doubts at all. 'It's the Unicorn,' she said.

'You can't see that!'

'You can't,' she said and she jumped off the wall on the opposite side from the road where she squatted down behind a clump of choker weed and had a pee – something she always seemed to have to do when she was excited.

But she was right about the coach. When it drew up at Marker Oak

about ten minutes later, the gold unicorn emblem on its side was right there in front of my nose. I didn't pay much attention to it though and neither did she. We were both watching the door. It hissed open at last and there was Bobby. He waved to us, chucked a canvas hold-all into my arms then turned and said something to the driver. I stared up at his dark blue uniform with its gold dagger flash and the S.S.C. initials and I felt a sort of tightness inside my chest as though my heart was swelling up with pride and might burst at any second.

Bobby jumped down into the road and grinned at us. 'Hey, you've sprouted, kids!' he cried, punching me lightly on the chest with one hand and giving one of Tammy's braids a jerk with the other.

'You too,' I said. 'Could be the uniform though.'

'And the haircut,' said Tammy.

The door thumped shut, the driver honked his horn, and the coach pulled away with a few pale-faced passengers peering down

'Bobby was a law unto himself; he did things his own way.'

curiously at the three of us standing there in what must have seemed like the middle of nowhere.

Bobby, Robert James Harkecz, Private First Class. Nineteen years old. Six years older than me; ten years older than Tammy. 'Wild' Bobby, our brother; object of my hero-worship since the days when I had first crawled off in vain pursuit of him around the kitchen floor. Bobby, back home on his first furlough, a boy no longer. He stretched his arms wide, drew in a deep breath and gave an exaggerated sniff. 'Phew! Ripe cow shit! That's home sweet home all right!'

Our house was over a mile from Marker Oak. It stood by itself on the outskirts of the village which Dad was fond of saying was 'on the direct route from nowhere to nowhere' and where, for the last 25 years, he had earned his living as headmaster of the local school. His pupils were drawn mainly from the farms which were scattered up and down the valley. Most of the children became farmers or farmer's wives in their turn and eventually sent their own chil-

dren to the school. There was a sense of continuity in the process which was not unlike the slow circuit of the seasons. Out there, beyond the valley, was that other world whose language we saw flickering on our So-Vi screens. From time to time we even ventured out into it, only to return thankfully vowing that there was no place like home. All of us except Bobby, that is.

Bobby was a law unto himself; he did things his own way. When he was a boy of 14 he set his heart on owning a motorbike, but Dad said not until he was 16 and had taken his Matric. So Bobby went ahead and built one for himself out of odd bits and pieces he'd salvaged round about. He built it in Mr. Hammar's workshop while he was earning himself pocket money helping Mr. Hammar who was by way of being our local blacksmith-cum-motor-mechanic. When the bike was finished Bobby rode it in triumph through the village and around the school playground. Dad came out to see what all the racket was and nearly had a heart attack on the spot. I believe he thought Bobby had stolen the machine somewhere.

When he discovered the truth, Dad's way of coming to terms with this act of filial rebellion was to decide that Bobby was a natural born engineer who would go to university and take a First Class degree in Engineering. Perhaps he was right and Bobby was a natural engineer, but Dad always tended to look at things through his schoolmaster's spectacles and he and Bobby didn't see exactly eye to eye on this one. Bobby got his Matric all right because he had a mind as quick as a silverfish and a memory like a magnet, but two-thirds of the way through his University Entrance course he went off the boil.

He had got a proper bike by then (Dad had kept his promise and bought it for him as a reward for getting his Matric) and he used to roar off on his own in the evenings and sometimes not get back until the cocks were crowing.

There was a girl called Mary Helso who had gone soft on him when he was still just a kid at school and it seems he used to make a habit of picking her up on his bike and driving off with her into the Plains towns. The first we knew about it was when Mr. Helso turned up late one evening and shut himself up in the sitting room with Dad and Mum. He talked very loud though, and the things I heard him saying about Bobby weren't at all polite. Dad stuck up for Bobby and gave as good as he got till in the end Mr.

Fiction

Helso quietened down and said he'd just thought that Mum and Dad were getting up to know what their son was getting up to and that the one thing he could tell them for sure was that Bobby wasn't going to get up to it any more with his daughter, not if he, Bill Helso, knew anything about it! Then they all had a drink and Dad said he'd speak to Bobby as soon as maybe.

After Mr. Helso had gone I climbed out of my bedroom window and ran down the road towards Marker Oak to try and intercept Bobby on his way home. Luckily it was one of his earlier nights and it wasn't too long before I heard his bike in the distance. When I saw the headlight coming I stood in the middle of the lane and jumped up and down waving my arms. He pulled up just in front of me and said: 'What in hell's name do you think you're playing at, Rog?'

I told him what I'd overheard. He listened to me in silence. When I'd finished all he said was: 'The stupid bloody cow.'

'Who? Bill Helso?' I asked. Bobby just sort of snorted and told me to climb up behind him and to hold on tight.

He dropped me off by the out-house so that I could climb up into my bedroom by way of the lean-to roof, and then he put his bike away. I saw a downstairs light go on and guessed that Dad had been waiting up.

I don't know what Dad said to him. I asked Bobby as soon as I had a chance but he just winked at me and said he'd tell me when my balls dropped. I don't think he meant to be hurtful – it was just his way – but it couldn't have stung worse if he'd slapped me across the face.

Whatever it was Dad had said it seemed to have an effect. For the next six months Bobby worked harder at his studies than he'd ever worked in his life. It was almost as though he'd set out to prove something to himself. From time to time letters used to come for him addressed in a sort of round schoolgirly hand but I don't think he ever answered them. Some of them I don't think he even bothered to open. I'd never known Mary Helso very well – she was a lot senior to me – but I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for her. I doubt if Bobby ever thought about her at all.

In the spring he went off to the University to take his entrance exam. He was away for five days. When he got back Dad held an elaborate post mortem on all his papers, alternately groaning and applauding. Bobby just grinned in that strange one-sided way he so often favoured when he was talking

to Dad, as though he was laughing inside himself at some joke he couldn't bear to share with anyone.

Bobby was out when the letter with the results came. It was addressed to 'Robert J. Harkecz' and had the university crest printed on the top left hand corner. It lay there on the hall table like an unexploded bomb while we tiptoed around it and none of us dared to open it. I was sent out to try to locate Bobby, but I guessed he was probably 20 miles away making up for lost time with some new Mary Helso so I didn't look very hard.

He turned up just in time for supper and seemed surprised that no one had opened the letter. 'What does it matter who opens it?' he said. 'The result won't be any different.' And with that he flipped the letter across to Tammy who was so overcome she promptly dropped it.

When finally we got it open and learnt that he had passed well up in the Second Grade we all broke into wild applause. Dad unlocked the sideboard and poured out two slivovs for himself and Bobby and glas-

***'The President of
our own country's
a General. And so
was the one before
him.'***

ses of wine for the rest of us. It was as much his moment of triumph as anyone's and he was just about to launch himself into some sort of speech when Bobby held up a finger and stopped him. 'You're happy, Dad?' he asked.

'I'm absolutely delighted Bobby.' 'It's what you wanted?' 'Of course, of course.'

'Even though it isn't a First Grade?'

'That's immaterial. We'll make up the difference somehow. You won't go short on your grant, I promise you.'

'Don't worry about that, Dad. It won't be necessary.'

I looked from Bobby to Dad and back again wondering what this was all about. I felt a sort of sick tenseness inside me and a strange, fearful apprehension for Dad who was still smiling a sort of vacant, puzzled smile as he said: 'I don't follow you, Bobby.'

Bobby looked down at the glass of slivov he was holding. 'It's just that I shan't be taking up my place.'

We all stared at him and Dad

croaked 'What?' as though his mouth was full of soot or something.

Bobby raised his head and glanced around at Mum and Tammy and me. Then he turned back to Dad. 'Your boy's joined the army,' he said. 'Cheers!' And he raised his glass and drank the spirit off as though it was milk.

I never really did understand why Dad took it the way he did – I mean it's not as though Bobby had done something *wrong*. After all, every country has to have an army. The President of our own country's a General. And so was the one before him. Engineers never get to be President of their country. Besides they're always telling us on the So-Vi what a great life it is in the army and how all the girls so crazy when they see a uniform. I suppose Dad was just being old-fashioned because he'd set his heart on Bobby being a professor or something, but there's no getting away from the fact that he was pretty badly upset. Not that he could do anything about it (Bobby was over 18 by then) but he had a sort of cold, stunned look for a long time afterwards, even after Bobby had left.

We had a few letters from him (well, cards mostly) but he never said much. He did his initial training hundreds of miles away in the south. We expected he'd be home for Christmas but in October he wrote that he'd been offered a transfer into the Special Service Corps which meant another three months' intensive training followed by a spell of routine attachment. The S.S.C. is the one they always show you on the So-Vi with the men leaping out of those black helicopters and firing their lasers from the hip as they charge off into the smoke of battle. They say that all S.S.C. men are hand-picked for their super intelligence. They're also supposed to be totally fearless and as tough as armour plate. When they have the big Anniversary Parade in the Capital it's always the S.S.C. who form the Guard of Honour for the President. They really are the best, everyone says so, and naturally I was pretty excited that Bobby had been selected and I didn't lose any time bragging about it to the other kids at school.

Then one day Dad called me into his office and told me that he didn't want me to go round sounding off about Bobby quite so much and that reflected glory wasn't worth the having since you yourself hadn't done anything to earn it. It struck me that he felt sort of *ashamed* of Bobby in some way and I told him so straight out.

He shook his head. 'That's not

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... **TODAY**

Brothers—Cowper

true, Roger,' he said. 'If I'm ashamed of anyone I'm ashamed of myself. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you like this. Try and forget I ever said it.' And he smiled at me and patted my shoulder and let me go. And that was all there was to it except that afterwards I didn't shoot my thumb off quite so much about Bobby. I don't really know why.

In August Bobby wired to say he was coming home on a week's leave and that he'd be arriving the next day. Typically, it was the first we'd heard of it. Tammy and I spent all the morning polishing up his motor bike ready for him and then we went down to Marker Oak to meet the coach, which is where I began telling you all this.

As the three of us were walking back up the road where I'd once waylaid him in the middle of the night I asked him if he remembered it. He laughed and said he hadn't forgotten, then he changed the subject and began questioning Tammy about school and how things had been in the village since we went away. I was dying to ask him a whole load of stuff about what it was really like in the S.S.C. but no sooner did I put a direct question to him than he dodged around it or just shrugged and said he found it all too boring to think about which seemed a pretty ridiculous thing to say. Finally it struck me that possibly he didn't want to talk about it in front of Tammy, so I let the subject drop till I could get hold of him on his own.

At supper that night it came out that the reason Bobby had got this leave was that he'd been selected to go on an Officers' Training Course. When Dad heard this he brightened up immediately and said that must mean Bobby could opt for the Engineers and be able to collect his degree at the Government's expense. I thought Bobby might take the opportunity to put Dad down again, but all he said was that he couldn't apply to specialize till he'd got through his Part One which would take him six months. Even so I think Dad looked happier than he had done since the day Bobby broke the news about joining the army, and later, when Bobby had gone off on his bike to look up some old friends, I heard Dad say to Mum that it seemed as if everything might be working out better than he'd dared to hope.

It wasn't till the third full day of his leave that I got Bobby to myself. Someone he knew had given him two passes for a day's fishing up at Lake Varna and he invited me to go with him. I didn't need asking twice. Tammy pulled a long face and said why couldn't we borrow Dad's car and all go, but Bobby said he'd only

Fiction

got just the two passes and that they wouldn't let anyone in who hadn't got one. He promised her we'd all go out somewhere before he went back.

Varna's up in the hills about 15 miles north of our village. They built a dam there across the river years ago before the Revolution and then stocked the lake up with fish. Everyone thought it was going to be a Peoples' Recreation Centre but somehow it got taken over by the Government and made into a sporting reserve for high ranking Party Members and their pals. Bobby never did say how he'd managed to get hold of those two passes.

We left on his bike straight after breakfast and were there in about half an hour, which was pretty good going when you consider how the road twists and turns. We motored in past a big sign-board which said 'GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. KEEP OUT.' and then pulled up outside the lodge. A Warden came out and Bobby handed him the passes and showed him his S.S.C. identity card. The Warden glanced at me, grinned,

'I noticed a pink scar running diagonally across Bobby's left shoulder blade.'

and then told us we could drive on round to the landing stage on the far side of the lake and borrow one of the rowing boats which were tied up there. 'Any fish under half a kilo you put back,' he said. 'Good luck.'

The sun hadn't yet had a chance to do more than just thin out the mist on the lake. There was no breeze at all and the pale green water was as flat as a looking-glass. When Bobby switched off the engine and my ears had stopped ringing I felt the stillness of the place creeping in on me like a sort of spell and I think I would almost have believed him if he'd told me that we were the only two people left alive in the whole world. Then I heard the plop! of a rising fish and that brought me back to my senses again. We sorted out our tackle, laid the rods in one of the boats, and then Bobby took the oars, rowed us out quietly into the middle of the lake, and we began to fish.

Dad used to say that you only know you've been truly happy after it's all over - when it's happening you're so wrapped up in what

you're doing you don't have any time left in which to realize how happy you are. I can see that he meant all right, but even so I'll swear I *knew* I was as happy as I'll ever be out there fishing on Varna Lake with Bobby that golden morning in August. At that moment, if I could have arranged to stop the world like a clock I think I'd have been quite prepared to do it.

We caught seven fish between us - two of them over the kilo mark - and then the sun began to quiver like a brass gong and the trout lost interest in anything we had to offer them and sought the shady depths. We rowed up and down for a while then made our way back to the jetty and had an early lunch of the sandwiches which Mum had packed up for us. After that we stripped off our shirts and stretched ourselves out on the warm planks of the landing stage. Even today I have only to catch a faint sniff of the aroma of ancient creosote to be transported back there again. Suddenly I noticed a pink scar running diagonally across Bobby's left shoulder blade. 'Hey! How did you get that?' I demanded.

'How did I get what?'
'That scar on your back.'
'Oh, that. On a.s.'
'What's "a.s."?'
'Active Service.'

I sat up and stared at him. 'Really? What sort of active service?'

Bobby opened one eye, looked at me, and then closed it again.

'Go on,' I said. 'You can tell me, Bobby. I promise I won't say a word to anyone.'

He gave a brief snort of a laugh.

'I swear,' I said desperately. 'I'll swear by anything you like.'

His eye opened again and surveyed me. 'What's it matter?' he said. 'I'm the one who's got it, not you.'

'But I want to *know*,' I pleaded. 'Why won't you tell me: It's not as if I'm Tammy. I'm your brother. You know I won't tell if you don't want me to. Please, Bobby.'

There was a long silence.

'Please,' I implored.

'All right,' he said at last. 'On one condition.'

'Yes?'

'You'll bite your tongue off before you tell anyone else.'

'Cross my heart,' I said.

'So what do you want to know?'

'How it happened,' I said, pointing to his shoulder.

'I told you. On a.s.'

'But what sort of a.s.?'

'A culling.'

'A what?'

'An urban A.T. mission.'

My eyes widened. 'What's that mean, Bobby?'

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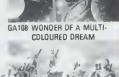
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Brothers—Cowper

'It means killing slummies,' he said.

'Killing who?'

'Slummies. Terrorists.'

'You've done that?'

'I've done that.'

'I never heard about it.'

Bobby said nothing.

'I wasn't on the news or in the papers, was it?'

'Ah, shit, Rog. You're still living in fairyland. Why don't you grow up?'

'What do you mean?'

He heaved himself up on one elbow, reached into the pocket of his tunic jacket and pulled out a packet of those thin, black cigarettes which he had taken to smoking. He lit one and dropped the spent match into the water through a crack in the boards. Then he fished out a pair of dark silvery glasses and put them on. They really did alter his appearance — made his face look *thinner* somehow. All at once he seemed years older. I didn't even know if he was looking at me or not.

'What happened Bobby?' I said.

'Did they attack you?'

'That's right.'

'Well, go on. Tell me about it. From the beginning.'

He turned over onto his back so that I couldn't see the scar any more and he let the smoke sort of dribble out of the corners of his mouth. 'From November to February we were stuck in a camp at Porto,' he said 'We were learning what A.T. was all about. 'Selective training' they called it. They were the toughest three months of my whole life. My section was in the charge of Sarko — Sergeant Instructor Sarkonovitch — Sonofabitch Sarkonovitch. That bugger knows every dirty trick there is to know and what he doesn't know he invents. One day he gave us a demonstration on 'Interrogation Procedures' . . . Bobby paused, took a long, thoughtful pull at his cigarette, and then said: 'Well, anyway, at the end of those three months our class was down to two-thirds. One of the lads was dead, two were in hospital, and five had just copped out because they couldn't take any more. The rest of us were passed as ready for active service and sent off to join different regular units.

'I hadn't been with mine for more than a week when who should show up but Sarko. There was a rumour about Sarko being temporarily relieved of his post as instructor because there was an enquiry pending on the kid who'd been killed on exercise, but I think he'd volunteered just to get back into the action. Talking about ways of killing slummies just wasn't good enough for him. He needed the real thing. A true professional.' Bobby twisted

his head towards me so that I suddenly saw the blue sky reflected in his glasses like twin, silver-rimmed puddles. 'Ah, hell, Rog,' he said. 'You don't want to hear all this crap.'

'But I do! I do!' I cried. 'Go on. What happened?'

His head sank back. 'What happened?' he repeated. 'Ajaka's what happened.'

I vaguely recalled having heard something on the news but I couldn't remember what it was. In those days that sort of political stuff didn't interest me very much. But of course I knew that Ajaka had been the provincial capital of the old industrial area in the south before the provinces were all abolished after the Revolution. Now it was just another of the old decaying Plains cities with a poverty problem — a name you marked in on your sketch map for a Geography test and then crossed your fingers and hoped you'd got it right.

'Wasn't someone shot there?'

I said. 'A General or something?'

'Colonel Parathos, the Chief of the

**' "Aren't you
forgetting the
babies? The ones
with the lasers
hidden in their
nappies?" '**

Secret Police. He wasn't shot though. He was blown up.'

'By terrorists?'

'That's right.'

'And you had to go in and get them?'

'We were given the job of sorting out the mess after the S.P. had been and ballsed everything up.'

'How did you do that?'

Bobby took his half-smoked cigarette out of his mouth and flipped it away into the water. 'We wiped them out,' he said.

'The terrorists?'

'Who else, dummy?'

'How many of them were there?'

'A couple of thousand.'

I laughed. 'Seriously, how many?'

Again his head turned towards me and those strange, empty-sky eyes regarded me blankly. 'I told you,' he said. 'About two thousand.'

'Two thousand terrorists?' I simply couldn't believe it. I don't suppose the whole population of our valley comes to much more than two thousand. It just didn't make sense.

'It was a major op,' he said. 'It lasted for five days. We sealed off

the whole of the old market quarter and smoked them out street by street. Our orders were total elimination. No prisoners. They called it an Urban Sterilization Exercise.'

By then I knew he was pulling my leg because he said it all so matter-of-fact — just like he used to when he was kidding me back in the old days. So I played right along with him in the way I'd always tried to do once I'd spotted what he was up to. 'I expect Sergeant Sarko was pretty happy,' I said.

'Oh, yes, Sarko loved every minute of it,' said Bobby. 'Specially the Preskar Tower. That was really the best. Forty-eight storeys high. They dropped us on to the top of it from two choppers and we went right down through it to the bottom, floor by floor. It took us a whole day. We killed 175. Thirty-eight of them were scored to Sarko.'

I giggled. 'He counted them?'

'He lugged them,' said Bobby.

'He what?'

With the forefinger of his right hand Bobby made a slicing motion down the back of his right ear. 'Off,' he said.

'And Alkanian cows all have six legs,' I retorted.

'You don't believe me?'

'Believe you! What do you take me for? Nobody does things like that! It's . . . it's not . . . but I couldn't find the word I wanted.'

'It's the truth,' he said. 'Every S.S.C. trooper's done it. It's the only sure way to establish a head count. Most of the bodies get blown up or burnt.'

'But you're in the S.S.C.' I said.

'So?'

'But you've never done that.'

'No?'

I stared at him and then I lunged out and snatched off his glasses. 'You liar!' I laughed. 'Bobby Harkecz you really are the biggest, most awful bloody liar in the whole universe!'

'And you're the world's biggest fool.'

'Well, at least I'm not fool enough to believe your lies,' I said. 'Lugging! I Why didn't you make it "cocking" while you were about it?'

'Because women don't have cocks, old son. But they all have ears!'

'Women!' I cried, launching myself at him and pummeling his bare chest with my fists. 'Aren't you forgetting the babies? The ones with the lasers hidden in their nappies? What about them?'

He gripped my wrists and held me like an iron vice (I had forgotten just how fit and strong he was). Then, in one easy movement he sat up and deposited me flat on my back on the boards at his side. 'You want to

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know how I got my scar?' he said, leaning over me. 'So I'll tell you, sonny boy. A kid of about your age did it with a long-handled bill-hook. She was hiding in beside a door when I kicked it in. If it hadn't been for my webbing she'd have had my arm off. Sarko blew her to bits ten second later. You don't believe me?'

I knew he was telling the truth and I said so, but by then he wanted something more than that from me. Still holding me down with one hand he reached back into his tunic jacket and pulled out the wallet which held his identity card. He let go of my wrist and thrust the wallet into my hand. 'Undo the zip,' he said.

Wondering what was coming I did as he told me and then held out the wallet to him.

He shook his head. 'Take out what's in the pocket.'

I dipped in my fingers and drew out a small sealed envelope of milky, opaque plastic. It measured about 3 inches by 2.

'Open it.'

I looked at it and then I looked up at him.

'Open it,' he repeated.

'It's a joke,' I thought, squeezing the envelope between my finger and thumb. 'He's been leading up to this all the way along. He's planned it all just to see how big a fool he can make out of me. It's a French letter, that's what it is.' And grinning I pulled free the tongue of the envelope and shook its contents out into my cupped palm.

It could perhaps have been a scrap of honey-brown chamois leather, but for the tiny hole which someone had pierced through the softly rounded lobe to hold a missing ear-drop. Where the sounds of life had once trobbled down through warm coils of convoluted darkness there was now nothing but a ragged vacancy framing the pink criss-cross lines in the centre of my own palm. I stared and stared at it while a huge smothering tide of shame and anguish rose choking within my breast. I felt as if God's finger was pointing down at me and that pitiful little morsel of a never-to-be lived life was silently accusing me of having connived at all the savagery and heartache in a world gone mad. As the hot tears blinded me and I buried my face in the cradle of my

own arms all I could manage was to blubber: 'But it's Tammy's! It's Tammy's!'

* * *

Just why Bobby should have chosen so brutal a way of ripping open the chrysalis of my childhood and dragging me out into his 'real' world I never did discover, but it has occurred to me more than once that what he did to me then must have been at least as important for him as it was for me. Maybe he saw it as a sort of symbolic cutting of the cord that joined us both – the link of my need for him. Or perhaps he just felt a compulsion to unburden himself of the things he had seen and done. Or maybe he was simply sick to death of being anyone's hero, even mine. To be honest I'm not even sure that he knew why he'd done it. Neither of us have ever spoken of it again from that day to this.

Bobby is a Lieutenant now. This summer I shall sit for my Finals in Agricultural Science. Tammy is engaged to a farmer.

All this happened long ago, and in another country.

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After a brief foray in bookselling, John Grant spent a dozen varied years in publishing as a commissioning editor, before opting to become a full-time writer and freelance editor; now, as might be expected, he doesn't understand how he ever found time to work for other people.

Under another name, he is responsible for the English version of Jacques Vassal's 'Electric Children', co-edited 'Planet Earth: An Encyclopedia of Geology' and was a major contributor to the 'Phaidon Concise Encyclopedia of Science and Technology'. Under his own name, he has edited 'Aries 1', co-edited with Colin Wilson 'The Book of Time' and 'The Directory of Possibilities', and written 'A Directory of Discarded Ideas' (a number of new books are in the pipeline).

An Associate Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, he is married to a graphic designer. They live in the West Country with their four-year-old daughter who is, says John, 'the exact centre of our Universe'.

PSF by John Grant

Not so very long ago I finished writing my new book, which can most simply be described as an encyclopaedia of theories which have fallen by the wayside. Some of the theories – such as those concerning the luminiferous aether and phlogiston – were perfectly respectable ideas and, in their day, important; but most of the more modern ones could justify only the derogatory label of 'pseudoscience'.

While I was reading through the manuscript for the last time before sending it off to my publisher, it struck me most forcibly that, in terms of my financial well-being, I might better have spent my time concocting a suitably grand and embracing pseudoscientific theory – and then writing a book about *that*. Research would have been easy – a stroll down to the local public library and the random selection of a dozen books from its nonfiction shelves. (In the field of the pseudosciences, 'nonfiction' is a curiously uneasy term.) These tomes read and at least partly digested, the creative work would have started: the drawing together of disparate items of data from their pages, and the construction therefrom of my radical new theory. So long as I ensured that the subject of my theory was *big* – the nature of the Universe, the origin of Man, the Pyramids of

Egypt (ah, those mighty Rubik tetrahedra of the gods), the eruption of Mount Everest or the colour of God's eyes – my fortune was as good as in the bank.

I sat back in my chair, my eyes staring into nowhere but ringing up little £ signs. Think of Erich von Däniken, a millionaire before the publication of his fourth book! Think of Immanuel Velikovsky, basking in riches after a few games of celestial snooker! (It's not often realized that the 'why' of his theory was based on the idea that the Solar System is an atom in macrocosm, with the planets, like electrons, jumping from one orbit to another.) Think of Ignatius Donnelly, who succeeded in no less than *three* different fields, with *Ragnarok* (1882; a Velikovsky-type comet-catastrophe book), *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882), and *The Great Cryptogram* (1888; Bacon wrote *all* 'Shakespeare's' plays). Three wealthy men – could I become a fourth?

My palms began to sweat.

There was no need, even, for me to worry too much about my theory holding any scientific water. The general rule seems to be that, the more 'the scientists' dislike and denounce your ideas, the more lucrative those ideas will prove to be. The storm of educated protest thrust Velikovsky's first book, *Worlds in Collision* (1950), unswervingly to the top of the US bestseller lists. When hysterical academics threatened to boycott the textbook list of Velikovsky's publisher, the book was transferred to another publisher – but it stayed at the top of the charts. Moreover, such activities on the part of orthodox scientists generally serve only to fuel the

pseudoscientists' paranoid conviction that the establishment is trying to operate a 'cover-up': 'They're condemning my theory because they don't want to lose their jobs for having got it wrong all these years.' (Paranoia is a strong attribute of the great pseudoscientists. In Peter Krassa's *Erich von Däniken: Disciple of the Gods* (trans. 1978) we discover that orthodox science is trying to discredit von Däniken by use of a whispering campaign to the effect that he is homosexual.)

If you find that the 'cover-up' defence does not appeal to you, why not consider this elegant piece of sophistry from one of the worst 'scientific' texts ever published, Pauwels & Bergier's *Impossible Possibilities* (trans. 1971):

Nobody demands that a literary critic be capable of writing a second *Remembrance of Things Past*; instead he is allowed to stand for what he is: an avid reader of books with taste and judgement, a layman with some expertise. It is quite a different story when a nonscientist dares to direct reasoned criticism at science: the majority of professional scientists immediately object.

This I would quote in the Introduction to my cosmos-shattering book: if some reactionary clown somewhere protested that the literary critic should actually have read Proust before reviewing *Remembrance of Things Past*, I could simply fall back on my second line of defence and cry: 'Cover-up!'

It all seemed so easy. Should I 'phone my bank manager now or wait until I'd rattled off the first few pages? But then doubts began to trickle slowly across the arid wastes of my mind (I was already practising this sort of imagery). You see, some

Non fiction

pseudoscientists haven't made it into the big time. Alfred Lawson, founder of that incredible knowledge system Lawsonomy ('If it isn't real; if it isn't truth; if it isn't intelligence; then it isn't Lawsonomy,' he modestly commented), seems to have died in poverty. And then there was the anonymous founder of that now-defunct 1960s Black Forest group, Vegetaria Universa, whose prime thesis was that the Universe is made entirely of vegetables: where is he now? George de la Warr, of radionics fame, died a bankrupt. Have you ever heard of Eric and Craig Umland, who have proved beyond doubt that the spacefaring Maya colonized the Earth 40 million years ago? And 'Professor' Patrick Cullen, the discoverer of mammarmism (a technique akin to palmistry, except using the wrinkles around the female nipples), was at no time in his life a rich man.

Still, such failures have been few and far between. Most literate, or even semiliterate, pseudoscientists have been able to make at least a decent living out of their theories. An idea began to form in my mind – a real spacetime-wracking hypothesis. A dilemma: should I write it up in the form of sf, or as a good, solid, reliable work of pseudoscience? The latter course was bound to bring me ten times as much money...

With a mercenary gleam in my eye, I turned towards the typewriter.

In fact, though, there is a great tradition of pseudoscience being scattered abroad in the guise of sf, although there are comparatively few modern practitioners. One has to pick one's way a little carefully here, because the science of one generation is easy to confuse with the pseudoscience of the next. Moreover, the speculative science of the past might seem to us to be the rankest pseudoscience *only because it has turned out to be wrong*: just a few decades ago it was the fashion in geophysics to classify Wegener's continental-drift hypothesis as pseudoscience, but today it is a part of the reputable Earth sciences. The fact that Wegener's motive force behind the drifting of the continents (*Pohlflicht* – 'flight from the poles') is a myth makes little difference to the general thrust of his now-validated thesis.

Similar parallels within sf are easy enough to find. We admire H. G. Wells' prophetic powers in *The World Set Free* (1914), in which he predicted the atomic bomb. We forgive him without qualification for the errors of detail in his prediction – such as having the bombs dropped

by hand over the sides of biplanes.

Other sf horrors are not quite so easy to accept. Hugo Gernsback's grotesquely badly written and ill plotted *Ralph 124C41+* (1911–12) is a book stuffed with technological predictions – indeed, the predictions are its sole justification – which are, with the benefit of hindsight, in the main ridiculous. This is forgivable: he was speculating, and it just so happened that most of his speculations were wrong. Not forgivable, however, are his comments in the Foreword to my rather late edition of the book. Here he notes that modern readers may be surprised to find that the idea of the luminiferous aether is accepted in his novel; but adds words to the effect that 'we got on jolly well with it, so it seems a bit silly to have scrapped it'.

Here is pseudoscience at its



An unfamiliar evolutionary hypothesis (Empedocles' notion that the organs evolved separately, then joined up).

worst: ignoring the fact that 19th-century physics had tied itself up in knots trying to make sensible explanations of observed phenomena in terms of the aether, Gernsback urged that we welcome the concept back into the fold. Similarly, in 1964 Velikovsky, in a new Preface to *Worlds in Collision*, told us that science had now confirmed his prediction that Venus is rich in hydrocarbons: in fact, science had discovered the exact opposite. The message rings loud and clear: if the facts don't fit the theory, then the facts must be wrong.

An early example of pseudoscience fiction (or psf) is *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820). Although published as by Captain Adam Seaborn, this may be the work of one John Cleves Symmes, the 19th century's principal promoter of the hypothesis that the Earth is

hollow [other novels on this theme include Casanova's *Icosameron* (1788) and Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864, trans. 1872). Some modern pseudoscientists support Symmes' contention; for example, Raymond Bernard and the notorious Brinsley le Poer Trench, both of whom believe that the interior of the Earth is where all those UFOs come from (the former suggests that these craft are piloted by Nazis, who escaped to this obscure subterranean sanctuary at the end of the war). In this light, it might seem rather uncharitable to pick on a novel published as long ago as 1820, yet even by that time the idea of the hollow Earth was firmly a part of the pseudosciences, rather than of the speculative sciences.

Some pseudoscience is of course perfectly acceptable to sf readers – indeed, some elements of it are established sf conventions: time travel, psi, hyperspace. More interesting in this context are attempts by sf writers to take improbable pseudoscientific theories as the bases for perfectly serious novels. A good example is Piers Anthony's *Rings of Ice* (1974). The kingly of this book is the annular theory of the US Quaker scientist Isaac Newton Vail. This theory neatly ties together the Flood, Saturn's ringedness, and the fact that the gas-giant planets have visible 'surfaces' which look rather like incredibly thick canopies of clouds. In 1886 Vail proposed that once upon a time the Earth had a ring or rings – indeed, that all planets pass at least once through an 'annular stage'. The Earth's rings lost momentum and collapsed groundwards: on hitting the atmosphere they dissolved into a tremendous canopy of water vapour whose lower level was about 150 km above sea level. Since there is less centrifugal force at the poles than there is at the equator, the canopy began to collapse yet further in the polar regions – before disintegrating completely over a period of about 40 days and 40 nights, so earning the Noah family their niche in history.

Clearly, then, Saturn is in the annular stage; Venus and the gas giants excepting Saturn are in the canopy stage; and the other planets have passed through their canopy stages (remember the evidence of flash-flooding on Mars?). I am not certain why Saturn is currently in both annular and canopy stages.

The idea is not without its elegances: the rings of Jupiter and Uranus have only recently been discovered, and so their existence could not have been known to Vail; and some astronomers now sug-

PSF—Grant

gest that the Earth, too, might once have had a set—although some billions of years before Noah's time. Still, it has a few failings...

Nevertheless, Anthony makes intriguing use of it in order to produce a modern version (*sans* Ark) of the Noah legend. True, he might just as well have done this by invoking some hard-science misadventure; but, by use of a pseudoscientific rationale, he has produced a novel in which, whenever the plot flags (which is quite often), the background theory sustains interest.

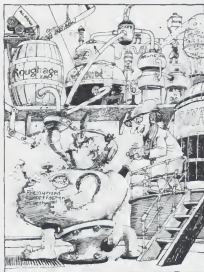
Rings of Ice is one of the few modern psf novels of any note. Others include Eric Frank Russell's *Dreadful Sanctuary* (1951), which adopts a 'we are aliens' theory put forward by Charles Fort. Two brief points should be made about this novel: firstly, Fort was less of a pseudoscientist than a 'great suggester'; and, secondly, Russell's hero shows that the theory is, in this case, a hoax. Other stories and novels based on Fortean ideas tend to be uniformly embarrassing—there's one by Donald Wollheim, whose title my mental censor has wisely excised from my brain, which should be proudly featured in anybody's personal Science Fiction Hall of Fame. As should John Campbell's nutty espousals: he seems ever to have believed that a major scientific breakthrough would first be announced in the pages of his magazine, an echo of his touching faith that sf fandom was the vanguard of Future Man. Campbell fell for the ludicrous 'Dean Drive', the ludicrous 'Hieronymous machine', and the equally ludicrous 'Dianetics'.

Some authors have taken a different tack: they have attempted to put across in fiction rational explanations of pseudoscientific myths. This does not seem to be a blessed enterprise. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples is *Stonehenge* (1972) by Harry Harrison and Leon Stover. Quite respectably linking the legend of Atlantis to the eruption of Thera, they trace the adventures of one Ason, Prince of the Mycenae, as he seeks a new home. Lacking all of Harrison's acclaimed wit, the book could equally well be called something like *Ason - Barbarian of Atlantis*.

But, to the layman, there is one area of pseudoscience which is practically indistinguishable from sf: UFOlogy. The reasons for this confusion are obvious: one popular theme of sf is the arrival of visiting aliens, and, to the man on the Clapham omnibus, a UFO is nothing more nor less than a visiting spaceship (in fact, modern UFOlogists generally disagree profoundly

with this equation, but that is by the by). It is perhaps in this light strange that there seem to be few if any satisfying works of psf which take UFOs as their primary theme. The 'Golden Age' spawned quite a number of tales of involuntarily visiting aliens whose UFOs had crashed, eliciting lines like 'So ol' Doc Moosejaw was right about flying saucers all the time' and 'Gee, Elmer, ain't this little feller cute?' In other words, since one of sf's main rôles is to question 'accepted fact', it was for a while respectable to suggest that perhaps orthodoxy, in the matter of flying saucers, was making a mistake. This particular tables-turn became such a cliché that in a few years it shuffled uneasily from the stage of sf history.

More recently, however, there have been few attempts to marry this particular area of pseudosci-



A new medical theory explodes.

ence with mainstream sf. Fewer still have been the successful attempts. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* may have its times of visual beauty but, if one ignores a few of its closing moments, it can hardly be described as sf—it is, in reality, a 'wonder tale' of the old school. Ian Watson made a brave attempt in *Miracle Visitors* (1978). While this is a clever work, it is, I think, the least successful of his novels, in that its finally revealed rationale strains the credulity rather more than the premise that alien-piloted UFOs are stalking the stratosphere. And a little cluster of novels incorporate flying saucers constructed by mankind, for various reasons, fair or foul: best known is probably *Wild Card* (1974) by Raymond Hawkey and Roger Bingham. But such novels generally assume that the Mad Scientist is building his flying

saucer as a morphological imitator of 'observed' UFOs: in other words, the books may be genuine sf, but they have nothing to do with UFOlogy proper.

This lack of overlap between the two fields is surprising, and I suspect that it has come about for emotional rather than intellectual reasons. Most people involved in any way in sf rather understandably wish to put as much distance between themselves and the 'UFO crazies' as possible; they are tired of being tarred with the same brush. (The problem is even worse for people involved in astronomical research—and is actually shared by some UFOlogists.) As a result, an sf tale based on UFOs is likely to have a hard time of it.

Yet this embarrassed evasion of the subject is scarcely logical when one views the various domains which sf joyously accepts. We are all used to the convention that the scientific underpinning of an sf story may be quite ludicrous, as may be its premises: it is the author's job to make us suspend our disbelief as he or she explores the possibilities inherent in the admittedly improbable circumstances. Do sf writers avoid the theme of time travel just because it seems to be impossible? No—of course not: they gleefully explore 'time paradoxes'. Readers are happy with faster-than-light travel (especially if concept is well dressed in pseudoscientific jargonese) and with ESP, yet we have little reason to believe that either are possible.

In the case of UFOs, then, we must conclude that sf writers avoid a potentially fascinating area of the pseudosciences simply because they are too embarrassed to explore it.

One extremely strong link between sf and pseudoscience is to be found in 'sweetness'.

Oppenheimer placed great value on the 'sweetness' of any technique or set of equations. If the construct under consideration were 'sweet' then, according to Oppenheimer, it was almost certainly valid. It's hard to define 'sweetness': let's cross our fingers and say it is the property of 'just-rightness'. Einstein had the very similar idea of 'elegance', although he was not always prepared to place the full weight of his confidence behind it—hence the sad tale of the 'cosmological constant'. (Einstein's 'elegant' equations indicated that the Universe was expanding. The astronomers said it wasn't. Einstein introduced a fiddle factor, the cosmological constant. The astronomers discovered that the Universe is indeed expanding. Exit

Non fiction

cosmological constant, pursued by a bear.) Both men were describing that moment when you look at all the data around you and a pattern suddenly springs into view. 'Aha!' you cry, clutching your forehead. 'That's the way it all hangs together! That's the fundamental truth!'

In other words, they were in essence describing the moment of insight.

Insight is a tool which is useful in the hands of an Einstein or an Oppenheimer, but it can be dangerous in yours or mine – or even Erich von Däniken's. When insight is successfully applied, we regard it with something approaching awe; when it fails, we describe it as 'jumping to conclusions'. In *Mystery of the Ancients* (1974), the Umlands provide a 'sweet' and 'elegant' proof that their spacefaring Maya mined the metallic core of the Moon: the Moon doesn't have a metallic core any more. In *The Beginning Was the End* (trans. 1973), Oscar Kiss Maerth comes up with another startling piece of 'sweetness': fish can never become intellectual, because in order to do so they would have to be able to speak, in order to be able to speak they would have to open their mouths – and if they opened their mouths they'd drown. Even more 'elegant' is a theory summarized by W. R. Drake in *Gods or Spacemen* (1964). He points out that the Moon is too far away for its gravitational influence to cause the tides: instead, what happens is that the sheer pressure of moonlight pushing down on the surface of the oceans makes their waters spread out at the edges.

All three are 'sweet', 'elegant' ideas – yet all are ludicrous.

We have the same feeling of 'sweetness' when we read many works of sf – indeed, there is almost a subgenre of sf in which the plot as a whole revolves around the revelation in the penultimate chapter of the reasons for all that has gone before. For weeks husky Bart Malone has been fleeing from the forces of the Supreme Overlord. Why are they chasing him? He doesn't know. At last he and the luscious Leia seek refuge with a wise old man, who tells Bart that he holds in his brain a secret which could make him the Master of the Universe. Much as in the epilogue to an episode of a US detective series, several pages are then devoted to cries of 'So that's why Mgruk tried to snaffle my widdershins in the scentoramal!' and the like. All of the preceding adventures can now be seen as components of a single, coherent whole (with the possible exception of the obligatory blow-job in Chapter 3).

It all makes sense: everything fits into place. The reader sits back, satisfied: he has shared the great moment of insight – if vicariously. He is as pleased as if he had solved the mystery before Hercule Poirot – and for exactly the same reasons. These are closely allied to the sense of 'sweetness'.

All this is to say that much sf and the bulk of pseudoscience share a single quality, present a similar appeal to the reader. When reading in the pseudosciences – an activity generally rather boring, even if punctuated by bursts of incredulous laughter – one comes across a certain expression time and time again: 'The only possible explanation for this must be . . . ' You may carp about the data, the presentation of it, and the conclusions drawn – but those other people over there are dragged along by the theorist's



The flight from the Martian Flood.

verbal and intellectual cartwheels, allied to their own ignorances, and experience with him the sudden flash of 'That's it!'

When reading sf we are conscious, always, of the fact that we are reading fiction; should that fiction give rise to constructive thought, or even contain important ideas and/or concepts, then so much the better – but, even if it doesn't, it doesn't matter: it was fun while it lasted. Probably many people experience exactly the same feeling while reading in the pseudosciences: here is fiction dressed up as fact, but somewhere, lurking in there, there might just be a useful insight. You do not expect to share the author's thrill as he suddenly puts forward his theory in all its glory; if you like, you're missing out on the pleasure enjoyed by 'those people over there' who take

the author's word as gospel. Too sophisticated to get your kicks from pseudoscience, you turn to sf, where you feel much safer because, while reading a fiction, you can allow yourself to believe in it, its premises and its characters; but then later you can put the book down and dismiss it all as a fantasy. (But note that fiction can drag over into real life, as witness the semi-belief of many mystery fans in the reality of the Great Detectives – Poirot, Fell, Queen, Alleyn. This is most powerfully manifested in the case of Holmes, concerning whom there are numerous pseudohistories.)

So you – and, let's face it, I – enjoy letting ourselves believe, for a while, in the implausible. It's a curiously paranoid characteristic – all the rest are wrong, but we sf readers have seen, via speculations in the realm of the improbable, a strange kind of truth. We have listened to the sound of one hand clapping, and we feel that we are enriched because of it. The devotee of the pseudosciences has heard that same sound . . . but he believes that it is a genuine statement of reality, rather than merely an echo. Like him, we are seeking after a certain expression of the truth – which is clearly a hopeless quest in a Universe in which 'truth' is an invalid concept. He believes that the Grail is a goblet; we believe that it is an idea. The two views are not necessarily incompatible.

And, when the critics ignore 'our' form of literature, we cry, in effect, 'Cover-up!'

About a year ago I had to write a parody of an Asimov/Pournelle 'science fact' article. It was a case of deliberately manufacturing 'sweetness' – presenting as if it were inevitable a conclusion which could in fact be invalidated in any one of a thousand ways. After various complexities, involving all the usual modern Gribbin-style cosmological hardware, I proved that the Universe is in fact a giant brain. Shucks, it was easy.

You can imagine, then, my distress on coming across a copy of a book called *The Intelligent Universe* (1975), by David Foster. You can imagine my wrath: the pseudoscientists had beaten me to it.

I consoled myself by meditating upon a religious text, expounded via the Ayatollah Khomeini: 'If a person who is praying turns red in the face from suppressing an impulse to burst out laughing, that person must start the prayer all over again.'

I started to do as he said – but then I burst out laughing.

Bracknell,
Berkshire.

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on the first edition of *Extro*. This is just the magazine that the British SF fans have been waiting for, and I am sure it will meet with success.

Of the items in the first edition, the best in my opinion was 'Slow Harry' by Paul Campbell. It was well-written and had a couple of neat catches in it. More of this author's work please!

Also, the two interviews were very interesting and informative, as were the book reviews. In fact the only fault I can find with the magazine is that it is too short, though for the price I suppose I am expecting too much.

All in all, if you can keep to the standard set in the first edition in later numbers then the magazine will be a great success.

Good luck,
Francis Kates.

Balcombe,
Haywards Heath,
Sussex.

Dear Sir,

After a long search I located *Extro* No. 1 in Eastbourne. A good beginning. I'd read Priest's 'The Invisible Men' before. He writes well, but I like a bit more oddity in my SF. 'Sumi Dreams' was extremely well done, but once again, it need hardly be printed in a SF magazine. 'Slow Harry'; very good indeed, and I would like to read more by Paul Campbell. 'Flame and the Healer' a very well written mind jerker. Andy Cooper's 'A Night in Shining Armour', good writing but not SF as I see it. I liked the interviews and I hope you can find enough subjects to keep them going indefinitely. The cover has some nice colours. You don't say who did...

Yours sincerely,
Eric C. Williams.

Edgware,
London.

Dear Sir,

We've waited a long time for a British based SF magazine but, by the look of the first issue, we haven't waited in vain. *EXTRO* promises to be an excellent magazine, well worth the 75p you're asking.

Not everything in Number One was to my taste, but then, as you say in your editorial, you're hoping to appeal to a wide range of readers - and there certainly was enough in this issue to provide me with an enjoyable few evenings reading.

I was particularly impressed by the Watson and Kilworth contributions. 'Flame' must be one of Watson's best stories and Kilworth's 'Paper Frog' was one of the most intriguing pieces I've read for a long time.

D. A. W. Waddington.

EXTRO POST

Camberwell,
London.

Dear Editor,

I liked the first glossy edition of *EXTRO*, having liked it in its previous incarnation. The changes are a definite improvement, and I hope that it keeps going.

The Priest short story will make the edition a collector's piece, and if you can extract any fresh blood from that particular stone then it will be well received. I am not too keen on his earlier work, but 'The Invisible Men' was a small gem. I wish I could say the same about the Garry Kilworth piece, but I can't. It was precious and pretentious. I had my problems with Ian Watson's fiction confirmed, yet again, seeing an idea several orders more interesting than any of the others given no more than a pencil sketching. Andy Cooper's story was interesting, but not that original, while I thought Paul Campbell's piece an interesting, if not totally successful, exposition of a traditional concept and worth reading. *EXTRO* will be a success if you can keep up the standard, especially when you see the junk being printed in American short fiction magazines.

The Interview with Stephen Donaldson told me very little I didn't already know but seemed to indicate that he has a more realistic estimation of the Covenant stories than many enthusiasts (600,000 copies, ye Gods!). The interview with Ian Watson, however, told me a lot about the man and his work. It was good stuff and Dave Langford is to be congratulated on it. Whether he is to be congratulated on rehasing 'War in 2080' is another matter, but not all your intended audience will have read the book - if they had Dave would have legged it to some tax haven by now - so no real complaints. The Chris Evans dissection of Barry Longyear was good stuff too. More from Chris will put a smile on my face at least.

I do wonder at your cover price, though. *EXTRO* is obviously intended to be a quality product, and 75pence is not a lot for quality. I would imagine that many who would be committed readers would be prepared to pay more in the knowledge that the magazine would keep on coming rather than pay the current, modest, price and be uncertain of your finances. I doubt if a price of £1 would deter

casual buyers if you can keep attractive covers with well known names on them. This is, of course, a matter for your commercial judgement.

M. Taylor.

Stockport,
Cheshire.

ATTN: The Editor
(Anon!)

Hi,

It was a real pleasure to find at last a British SF magazine, appearing when so many U.S. SF mags are going - Galileo went half way through my sub, Galaxy went who knows where, Analog? SF Times?

It has been a long time now since we had a U.K. publication - with a consequent loss of talent as U.K. authors took up other things. I hope that you will encourage new talent as well as bringing works from established authors, and will as you promise, support ALL types of SF.

Please accept my wishes for a long and successful run.

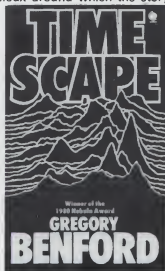
S. Shaw.

CRYING WOLFE by Chris Evans

Recently published in paperback are two science fiction novels which have received a very good critical press. Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, winner of the 1980 Nebula Award, comes with such recommendations as 'A brilliant novel' (*Publisher's Weekly*) and 'Science fiction at its very best' (Anthony Burgess). Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*, the opening novel in his 'The Book of the New Sun' tetralogy, has been hailed as 'The first volume of a masterpiece' by no less a person than Ursula Le Guin. Now 'brilliant' and 'masterpiece' are pretty strong terms of praise, even given the tendency to hyperbole in most blurbs*. I want to sound a dissenting note. While I certainly think that both these books should be read by anybody seriously interested in modern science fiction, I do not think that the great critical acclaim they have received is entirely justified but is instead another subtle manifestation of the genre mentality in science fiction.

logically and proceeds to a satisfying climax.

But this is no mere 'hard' science fiction novel, solely concerned with speculative ideas. Benford also provides plenty of background description of the two main scientific milieux around which the story is



complain thus. What is abundantly clear from *Timescape* is that Benford is a writer of limited gifts working to the peak of his ability in this book. Lacking the natural talent to bring a scene or a chapter alive by sheer inspiration or verve he has to labour hard and build painstakingly to achieve his aims. We should at least be grateful for this in a field notorious for the easy options taken by its predominantly complacent writers, and I do not want to demean his achievement. But I do think it ought to be put in perspective.

When Anthony Burgess pronounces it as 'Science fiction at its very best' what he is actually saying is that 'This is the best science fiction can achieve'. Well, this is nonsense. Burgess himself is a novelist of great natural ability and he must recognize that the character representation in *Timescape* is often plodding and stilted. Unfortunately good intentions alone are insufficient to create great art. There have been better novels than *Timescape* (from Wells, for example) and there

***TIMESCAPE* by Gregory Benford (Sphere, 1982, 412 pp. £1.75)**

***THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER* by Gene Wolfe (Arrow, 1981, 303 pp. £1.60)**

Timescape tells of the efforts of a research team based in Cambridge in 1998 to transmit a message back into the recently past using faster-than-light particles in the hope of preventing an unfortunate sequence of events which have brought about severe oceanic pollution and climatic disruption. Back in 1962 the scientist in California who actually picks up and decodes the messages finds that it is very difficult to convince anyone else of the importance of his discovery and to obtain continued funding for his project. The scientists at the broadcasting end of the experiment are also experiencing similar difficulties with funding and the niceties of interdepartmental politics. The science in the book is directly and plausibly extrapolated from current research and Benford, a practising scientist himself, works out all the intricacies of this ideas with a studious efficiency. In terms of plot, the book develops

based, and he is at pains to show his characters moving in a network of private and professional relationships. His scientists are not ciphers, motivated only by single-minded scientific curiosity; their activities are influenced by many different factors from family squabbles to career rivalry. In fact it quickly becomes clear that the chief *raison d'être* of the novel (and what seems to have impressed most of its readers) is the detailed portrayal of the lives of working scientists.

I would not dispute that the novel does succeed in this aim, but what a sedulous and laborious portrayal it is at times. What no reviewer seems to have remarked upon is how dull much of the first half of the book is – how cluttered it is with not very interesting or relevant domestic details. The cast spend far too much time pouring drinks or preparing meals or having inconsequential conversations with one another at tedious cocktail parties. Admittedly the story picks up momentum in the second half and more or less delivers everything it's capable of, but even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea.

It is, perhaps, rather churlish to

will be better ones. *Timescape* is a serious, worthy book: it's a work of careful craftsmanship and should not be despised as such. But, while filled with invention and good intentions, it is ultimately devoid of imagination in the highest sense of the word because it never succeeds in providing any of those rare moments of transcendence when the reader forgets that it's all a fiction and becomes totally absorbed in the created world, breathing its air and feeling the pulse beat of its characters.

Gene Wolfe is a writer of greater natural talent than Gregory Benford and *The Shadow of the Torturer* is correspondingly an achievement of a higher imaginative order than *Timescape*. Set in the far future, on a moribund Earth orbiting a dying Sun, it's the narrative of Severian, an apprentice who is expelled from the Guild of Torturers and begins his journey through the strange landscape of the dying Earth. The book has elements of fantasy but somehow always remains science fiction since its mysteries may simply be the result of sophisticated but forgotten technology. One of Wolfe's strengths as a writer is his

* The paperback edition of my own first novel has the words 'A remarkable novel' emblazoned on its cover. This is the publisher's abbreviation of a less flattering and more accurate description.

Crying Wolfe—Evans

ability to evoke atmosphere, and his sombre future world is richly and intriguingly fleshed out as Severian's narrative progresses. There are bizarre alien plants, arcane devices which the twentieth century reader can sometimes recognize as familiar, misplaced and ambiguous references which hold a similar promise of eventual clarification. The book oozes artistry from every pore of its poised narrative; it demands attention and intelligence from its readership and its ending leaves the reader anticipating the three further volumes, if only in the hope that the many mysteries and questions raised will ultimately be answered.

But is it the first volume of a masterpiece? For most of his career Gene Wolfe has concentrated on producing sophisticated and literate treatments of traditional science fiction themes. In many respects he's the man most likely to emulate Le Guin in proving that science fiction, written uncompromisingly from inside the field, can aspire to a wider audience and respectability. This is one of the main reasons why so many sf readers and critics wish him well. But science fiction, in its eagerness to establish its literary credibility to the world at large, has often been guilty of proclaiming as great works of literature books which are nothing of the sort. It would be a pity if this were to prove the case with 'The Book of the New Sun'.

My own feeling is that Wolfe would have been better advised to have had all four books published simultaneously. As it stands, *The Shadow of the Torturer* is just a fragment of a whole and despite its many fine qualities and obvious potential, the narrative is rather one-paced and at times apparently arbitrary: Severian meets and then re-meets characters in a fashion which seems contrived by the author rather than springing naturally from the impetus of the story. This generates the impression of a too heavy auctorial hand guiding the characters, and such a feeling militates against our hopes that the tetralogy will indeed prove to be the masterpiece which the science fiction world so desperately wishes for itself.

The ironic thing about all this is that if 'The Book of the New Sun' does prove to be a masterpiece, one can look forward to the day when it is reprinted without any overt pointers to it being science fiction. Publishers have few qualms about discarding the science fiction label and trappings when the sales potential of a book points to a wider readership. (*Timescape* is a case in point, with a slick but non-science-

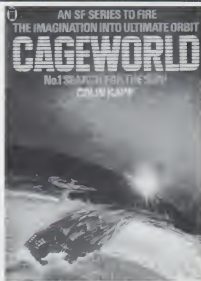
fictional cover and a category status of 'General Fiction' on its back page.) Thus the great uninitiated readership devour it and don't even realize that it's sf. So the crusade must go on from within. It's rather sad in a pathetic sort of way; science fiction is literature's ugly duckling: as soon as it grows up and becomes beautiful to everyone it discovers that it's changed into something else.

Ultimately any judgements on 'The Book of the New Sun' must be premature until we have the whole. In the meantime I would like to give my strongest recommendation to an earlier and somewhat neglected book of Wolfe's, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Originally published by Gollancz in 1973, it can still be found in its Quartet paperback edition in some specialist bookshops. This is a superior piece of science fiction which not only bears re-reading but demands it. Wolfe's story of a colony world haunted by the idea of a



race of indigenous aliens who may or may not have taken on human form and merged with the colonists is told in three distinct but interconnected novellas. The first, title, story forms the meat and the heart of the book but its two successors manage both to reveal more and deepen the mystery surrounding the aboriginal population.

This is a book rich in subtlety and ambiguity, and as a refreshing contrast to the Anglo-American coloration of our science fictional universe the colony was founded by the French and still has some Gallic elements in its society. Many passages in the book have a limpid beauty and as a whole its main characteristic is that it haunts you with its mysteries long after you've read it. In my opinion it's one of the most compelling and memorable science fiction books published in the last ten years and I'd strongly advise you to seek it out.



SEARCH FOR THE SUN! THE LOST WORLDS OF CRONUS

'Cageworld' Nos. 1 and 2.
By Colin Kapp
NEL. £1.25 each.

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Colin Kapp is a perennially promising author who has, to date, never quite fulfilled that promise. *Transfinite Man* (Berkley 1964, Corgi 1965, as *The Dark Mind*) is far and away his best novel, while his enviable flair for 'hard' sf is most ably demonstrated in the 'Unorthodox Engineers' stories. He remains—to borrow a definition coined by Damon Knight—a 'half bad' writer. Now Kapp has embarked upon a new series thumpingly entitled 'Cageworld'.

First, the good news. . . .

'Cageworld' is, without doubt, one of the most intriguing concepts to come along in lo! these many years. It puts the 'Gee Whiz!' back into modern sf. The Sun has been surrounded by vast concentric 'shells' designed for human habitation, placed in positions roughly equivalent to the orbits of those dear, old-fashioned planets. . . . But here is a good, representative sample of the technological 'infrastructure':

'The statistics on Mars shell were staggering, and only tolerable because of the trick of the human mind to handle immensity only in abstract, mathematical terms. . . . With a diameter of 283 million miles, and an equatorial circumference of 889 million miles, the surface of Mars shell was recorded as 2.5 times 10 to the power of 17 square miles, which Cherry shakily

translated as 250,000 million million square miles'. (*Search For the Sun!*, page 38).

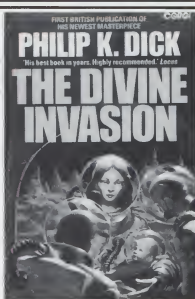
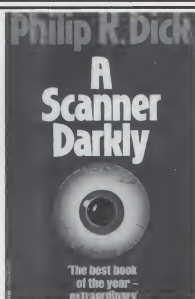
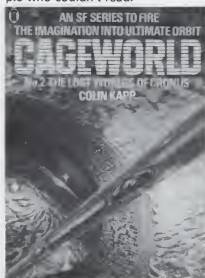
Take that, Larry Niven!

And now for the not-so-good news. . . .

The main 'characters' – for want of a better word – are straight from Central Casting at Poverty Row. According to the horrendous blurb which disfigures the back cover of *Search for the Sun!*, they are: (a) Maq Ancor, the Master Assassin; (b) Magician Cherry, Space Illusionist; and (c) Sine Anura, Mistress of the Erotic. And some of the 'sentences' might have been written by E. E. 'Doc' Smith on a good day, e.g. 'By coincidence and at roughly the same time but far overhead, another man was also bound for the Solarian Circus, and was finding his own brand of difficulties about route'. (*Search For the Sun!*, page 3).

To be fair, however, most of the above (adverse) criticisms apply to the inaugural volume of this quote 'sf series to fire the imagination into ultimate orbit' unquote. *Search For the Sun!* appears to have been thrown together ('written' is too strong a word) at breakneck speed, with little or no time for revisions. The second novel, *The Lost Worlds of Cronus*, is perhaps a harbinger of better things to come, with its infinitely more literate style, tighter plotting, and – especially – the dynamic, two-dimensional character named Niklas Boxa.

Search For the Sun! then, should be read (quickly!) as a necessary 'primer' for the much more rewarding *The Lost Worlds of Cronus*. Maybe Colin Kapp has finally come to realize that 'haste makes waste'. I wish 'Cageworld' well – most previous British original paperback sf series were seemingly written by people who couldn't write for people who couldn't read.



OBITUARY

Philip K. Dick, one of the most admired and influential of contemporary SF authors, died in California on the morning of Tuesday 2nd March. He was 53.

Dick was born in 1928; his first published story 'Beyond Lies the Wub' (1952) has, coincidentally, just been reprinted in the Sparrow Books anthology 'Peter Davison's Book of Alien Monsters'. His first novel 'Solar Lottery' (1955) was hailed by Damon Knight as marking an important new talent ('This is architectural plotting, a rare and inhumanly difficult thing'); in the sixties he published several major works which, with wit and disturbing profundity, tackle the difficult subjects of good and evil, reality and illusion, and the entropic running-down of things in general. The finest of these are 'The Man in the High Castle' (1962, a Hugo Award winner), 'Martian Time-Slip' (1964) and 'The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch' (1964); some of his best short stories are collected in 'The Preserving Machine' (1969).

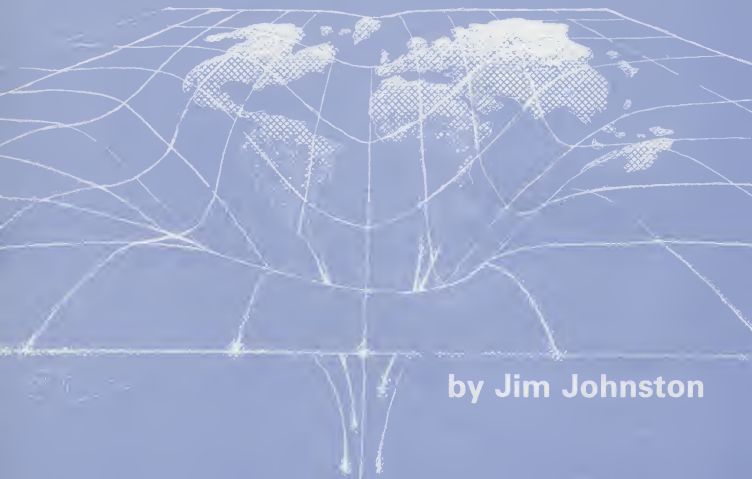
His most memorable work of the 1970s was 'A Scanner Darkly' (1977), an extremely powerful and moving novel which makes minimal use of SF apparatus in its savage attack on drug abuse. In 1981 Dick's work took yet another new direction with the knotty and controversial 'Valis', which with his subsequent 'The Divine Invasion' (a more accessible book) showed him to be still evolving and changing as a writer: a good memorial for him, if a sad one.

'Blade Runner', a film starring Harrison Ford, directed by Ridley Scott and based on Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' (1968), is scheduled for release from Warner in June 1982. Dick himself stated earlier this year that he was highly impressed by the final script.

Philip K. Dick was a writer who followed no popular trends but created his own: the wide circle of those who admired or even revered him did so not merely because he was a fine SF genre writer, a 'counter-culture' novelist or any such convenient pigeonhole, but because he was uniquely and brilliantly Philip K. Dick. As he once said of Christ, 'There should be more like him.'

David Langford
16.3.82

THE RETURN OF OCEAN STREAM



by Jim Johnston

Fiction

When McGlade came to, he found himself among the branches of a tree, spread-eagled so that his weight was supported by a mattress of thin, interlacing twigs. For the split-second of sight upon opening his eyes, he was rewarded with a red and purple afterimage of the surrounding range of hills before pain immediately blinded him. He struggled to move, to gather his limbs for locomotion. The twigs gave way with his movements and he fell yelling into the dark gulf.

Cold awakened him. Water ran swiftly nearby, the air about him damp and noisy with the sound of its fall. He sniffed at the distinct tang of salt in the air, the ozone of the seashore claiming his barely-conscious mind.

Painfully, as if ascending a jagged staircase of brittle glass shards, he became fully awake, growing aware that where once his limbs had been stretched, now they were cramped. He found himself with his back to a bank of damp earth, sitting in a niche formed by the roots of a fallen tree.

Even as he began to notice his surroundings, they changed: half the hillside slid away with no more noise than a vast sigh. Tons of salt-laden mud rode in slow-motion waves as a whole grove of trees sailed past and disappeared from view.

Even more surprising than the landslip was the fact that he observed it through the mist of his breath. The month was June, the day the 21st—or it had been. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious. At most, overnight. So that made it June 22nd. It still made him wonder at the mists about him, his own breath merely adding foreground to their swirling chaos.

Through the drifting mist what he could see of the landscape frightened him. It reminded him of photographs of trench warfare: huge, gaping crevasses, upended trees that slowly shifted in the quagmire at their roots, a half-demolished double-decker bus wedged between trees, choked with corpses at one end.

Stupefied by the carnage, McGlade thought himself the victim of some incredible disaster—perhaps the aftermath of an air-crash.

Then he noticed that the tree he sat on was not uprooted as he had thought. His legs straddled the

broad trunk, as he tried to give credence to what he saw. He wondered briefly if he had suffered a concussion to impair his sense of balance. But, no. Returning his gaze to the limits of his shifting horizon, he realized that the tree trunk was horizontal and that the ground at his back was . . . vertical.

He shook his head in disbelief. Some mad, impossible dream . . .

As he watched another mudslide, he realized the full extent of the disaster he had somehow managed to live through. Gravity had changed, suddenly, making the face of the Earth the face of some imponderable cliff, from which all but a very, very few would have plummeted to their deaths. Only the trees had caught him, and even they were following gravity's inexorable urgings.

Crowd scenes from films flashed before his eyes; his mind's eye tilted the inner scene to watch the millions pour like a stream of sand. He opened his mouth as if to call after them, to forestall their everlasting plunge. He thought of all the people he knew—all gone; and all the people he didn't know.

*‘ . . . he felt bad
about scavenging
the dead driver’s
wristwatch’*

It occurred to him that he was gaping, and he shut his mouth with a snap as if to stifle the scream that would come.

Shaking from more than cold, he reached forward to draw himself up on all-fours on the tree trunk. Crawling stiffly along, he tried to see if anyone else was about. An oppressive silence reigned over everything nearby, and in the distance was the rush of mighty waters: the source of the mists and spray. He shook his head in disbelief as he tried to visualize all the oceans of the world conjoining under the influence of this new law of gravity.

Climbing out along the tree, he startled a blackbird, which flew away piping. Surprise almost sent him over the edge, and he reared up to clutch a thin branch to steady himself. An involuntary glance down from his perch almost unseated him. The mists beneath swirled significantly, as if toying with the idea of revealing the gulfs they hid.

‘I don’t believe it’, he whispered, glaring wildly about. But he would: he had to.

He proved it to himself by making

his way over to the bus. He had once been a soldier in Aden, but the sight of the bodies on the bus upset him more than anything else he had ever encountered. But he was cold and needed extra clothing. The thin shirt he had worn for June weather was insufficient for this present climate.

Among the topmost bodies he found a large plastic bag full of clothes, doubtless being returned from a launderette. Using the tiny pen-knife he wore for decoration on his keyring, he cut the bag open and drew out two large blankets. He cut arm- and head-holes in the blankets. Poncho-like, they were better than nothing against the damp cold.

He felt ravenous, but he could no more hunt through the bodies in the hope of finding provisions than he could cut off his little finger for food. As it was, he felt bad about scavenging the dead driver's wristwatch. His own had been reduced to a bracelet during one of his falls. Telling the time would be some sort of comfort.

Judging from the position of the bus, he guessed that if he climbed directly up he would reach the road the bus had fallen from. Already his inner worldview had adjusted sufficiently to work out that roads would be important, for most of them would have walls or hedges along them, which would provide him with ledges to walk along. He guessed that up was now north, and if a road travelled due north, it would appear as vertical to him, therefore a road travelling in any other directions would afford him north, or upward-facing, ledges.

He left the bus and began making his way up the cliff-face of the world.

He had been a daring rock-climber when he had been in the Army, but he found most of his old skills so atrophied as to be useless. The mud was precarious, offering every opportunity or rejoicing civilisation at the bottom of the abyss. But he discovered bramble bushes and used these as a primitive stairway, ripping strips from his poncho to use as gloves to protect his hands.

Eventually he found himself by the wall of a house. The window overhead was intact. He broke it and climbed in.

Having regained his breath, he made a rapid inspection of the house. His progress through it was not as rapid as he would have liked. He had to be nimble to get about from room to room, for the doors were often ten feet or so above the tilted ‘floors’ he stood on. Only by piling up furniture to act as steps could he make any headway.

The house proved to be a bugnalow, and it was empty of people.

Ocean Stream—Johnston

Finding the kitchen, he righted a table and chair and laid them for one. Turning the fridge over, he opened it and helped himself to some cooked meats and salad, rounding it off with a few slices of bread and a pint of milk. He had always liked milk, and after today he knew he would never taste any again.

Rising from his meal, he trod on a nail that had once held up a calendar. He yelped in pain, hopping about, cursing. Then he grinned at the incongruity of the nail's position. Seconds later he was doubled over with laughter, followed by hysterical tears, and finally vomiting.

When he recovered, he set about making himself another, more modest meal, which he ate in another room on a sofa.

Having satisfied his first priority, he thought of getting some warmer clothes. He recalled that the bedroom had had a wardrobe.

It was a built-in wardrobe, 15 feet above his head. Reacting physically to the challenge he set about building the furniture up to reach it. As he worked (setting the tallboy in position beneath the doors, manoeuvring the divan on top of the tallboy) he tried to think of what he would need to survive in his new environment. As he wedged the bed against the wall with the dressing table, he found that his mind was a blank. He supposed miserably that he might be in shock, as he climbed up the divan, headboard in hand.

The wardrobe had sliding doors. By reaching up on tiptoe, he found that he could slide the door open with one of the slotted legs of the headboard. Several garments fluttered down; shoes thudded about him as he hid his face from their gravity-directed kicks.

With the wardrobe door slightly open, he had his first properly constructive thought: he now needed a rope and grapnel. He was so excited at getting his mind back into gear, that he climbed down and returned to the kitchen where he recalled seeing a pencil and notepad. Returning to the bedroom, he also carried as booty a floormop and a large, unused bundle of washing line.

He broke the shaft of the mop by leaning it against the wall at an angle, then stamping on it. He then tied the two lengths into a cross with some of the nylon line. This done, he commenced plaiting the rest of the line into a rope that he hoped would serve him until he found something more suitable.

As he plaited, he tried to jot down ideas on the notepad. His first thought was a rucksack, then strong boots. These led him to see that if he

could make his way to town, he would find all his needs at a sportshop. Recalling the shoes that fell about him, he added a helmet to the list. By the time he had the rope plaited, he had filled several pages with ideas.

Tying the cross to the rope, he proceeded to throw it up into the wardrobe. On the fifth cast, it was caught between the door and the jamb. McGlade hauled himself up hand over hand, to finally sit on the edge of the door. Hearing it creak ominously, he recalled the thin twigs that had held his dispersed weight, and lay back to spread his weight over a larger area.

There wasn't much room in the wardrobe, but it struck him as a good place to spend the night. Now that he was warmed by his exertions, he forgot that he had climbed up to the wardrobe for warmer clothes. He untied his rope from the 'grapnel' and tied it to the clothes rail, testing it to make sure it would hold his weight. Removing the clothes from their hangers, he spread them out as a pallet on which to sleep. Judging by the cut of the

*‘... the whole
house reared, like
a ship being driven
onto a reef ...’*

clothes, a well-off, middle-aged couple had lived in this house.

He spent the remaining hour of daylight going over his notes, putting them in order. When it got too dark to see, he lay down to invoke sleep. He was glad he was only 5'8", for even so he had to lie diagonally across the doors in order to stretch out. He left the door open a crack to give him fresh air.

Something woke him during the night. It was a relief, for his dreams had been hideous: sitting round a campfire, chatting to the bloody cadavers he had encountered on the bus. He was seduced by a young woman whose skull had been substantially caved-in. In the dream he had felt only desire for her. On waking, he remembered that he had barely noted her beauty, untouched, even in death.

He listened to the wind rising outside. Rain lashed against the broken window, and the floor of the room was puddled with rain water. He felt uneasy. For the first time he recalled the sensations he had experienced during the few days prior to waking up in the tree. Restless, sleepless,

irritable: he had taken leave from his factory job and spent his days on long hikes over the hills. He had been on one such ramble when the world had been overtaken by events. With a sudden, chill certainty, he assigned his present existence to his restlessness. If he had not been on the hillside, he would not have had the trees to break his fall. But then he recalled the trees caught in the mudslip and he knew that it was only by the wildest of flukes that he was still alive. Had he been home in his flat, he would also have survived, flung to the wall – but for how long? Doubtless the estate he had lived in was now swept away by the weight of waters coming from the Arctic. Again he was staggered by the thought of all that weight of water being shifted. He couldn't visualize the seas falling completely away from the planet, and so assumed that the seas in the southern hemisphere would fall towards the equator, perhaps to give Earth a ring of water and ice similar to Saturn.

Somehow, thinking this made the world much more inhospitable.

The uneasiness that had wakened him broke through his thoughts. He was trembling. Peace of mind had departed along with sleep. He decided to take a look outside.

Sliding the door open beneath him, he found that the tilt of the room had shifted in his sleep. Even as he discovered this, the whole house reared, like a ship being driven onto a reef in slow motion. Then, with a vast jarring of timbers and brickwork, the house broke open like an egg.

From the slow motion of the house adrift in the sea of mud, he found he was flung into the speeded-up motion of flight without wings. Darkness swept past him, enlightened only by inner flashes of pain as he struck objects of varying size and weight.

He was brought up short by the rope. Even in his mad panic he had kept his presence of reflexes so that he had the rope in his hand; his legs treadmilled as he climbed up the rope to find himself in what appeared to be the hedge at the bottom of the garden. Because the garden sloped, the house fell out and away, leaving McGlade untouched on his perch. Doubtless the house would start an avalanche plunging southwards.

The whole stupefying scenario of good luck left him gasping as he realized what he had come through. He had never been a godly man, but a sort of innate 'higher superstition' had always swayed him towards a belief in God. Not the 'God' of book and bible – but a vast, unapproach-

Fiction

able deity, whose merest offscouring of thought proved to be the physical universe. For the first time in his life, McGlade began to consider the possibility of guardian angels.

These awe-filled thoughts were emptied, however, by the distinct remembrance of screams as he had fallen. His own throat had been too busy grunting air into his lungs as he pulled himself up the rope to bother with the formality of a scream – so it hadn't been him.

He tried to see through the intense darkness, wondering if his bungalow had perhaps been the first of several such. Now he cursed his shortsighted attitude – he had been only content to satisfy his hunger; he had given no thought to other survivors in other houses.

And he was positive that he had heard children's voices mingle with those screams of a woman.

His face grew tense and unflinching as he silently berated himself – cursed himself with such inner fury that a sharp headache snapped into existence behind his eyes. Then the lump in his throat grew to such granite proportions that his neck threatened to split from chin to breastbone. And he wept – tears as potent as the wind-whipped raindrops that greased the air about him. Sobs racked him as if a giant

masseur, to huge to do more than crush him between thumb and forefinger, splintered his bones into a body-thorough catharsis. And, somehow, sleep claimed him.

Once again, it was cold that woke him. The wind gusted, squalling the rain about him as if he were in an eccentric shower room. His poncho weighed him down like a concrete shroud.

Almost before he opened his eyes, he sneezed. Stiffness sent shafts of pain across his shoulders, and when he turned his head to look about, he winced from the crick in his neck. His head throbbed; his throat felt as if it had been kicked. As he tried stretching sensation back into his limbs, he found them all cramping at once.

This was his lowest ebb ever. Even when badly wounded in Aden, battling several infections at once, he had never felt this bad. The difference, unfortunately, was external. During his hospitalization, he had been visited by a girl whom he hoped to marry. Her smile was a tonic in itself. He had been young, in peak fitness, with a future. Now he was older, disillusioned (not by his wife, but by himself), out of condition – and with no future (bar that of a savage in a crazy, cliff-face world).

One good thing: his poncho had saved him from the worst of the

thorns in the hedge. Seeing that the rope was still tangled among its branches, he set about unwinding it. It was a minor task to encourage him to wake up. Having accomplished it, he felt a lot better for doing it.

Then he recalled his notes and searched frantically for them until he found them inside his shirt. He reread them, committing them to memory, savouring a reassurance they seemed to impart to him. By the time he had learned his list off by heart, the rain had abated and he felt a little cheerier.

Feeling the weight of water in his poncho, he rose unsteadily on his platform of thorns and took the blankets off. He wrung them out and spread them out to dry a little.

He decided to do some physical jerks to get his circulation moving. As he couldn't jog on the spot, he confined himself to vigorous arm movements, pushing himself through his pain and lingering depression until he was sheened with sweat and he had reached his jogger's high – a state caused by the release of brain chemicals after vigorous exercising. One effect of the exercise was the need to evacuate his bowels, which he did promptly, after which he felt hungry, until another round of exercises made his body forget for the

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Ocean Stream—Johnston

moment its need for food.

He used the dampest poncho as a towel to wipe the sweat away, and then – on a sudden whim – threw it away. He watched it fall, outwards and downwards, until the wind took it and lifted it far away and high up. Watching the yellow scrap of blanket, McGlade was reminded of his hang-gliding flights. With his eyes locked onto it, he could almost feel in his own limbs the wind bucking at the blanket. His arms and legs flexed, trying to steer the blanket through the turbulence as if by means of sympathetic magic. And when he saw it rise, rise – rise! overhead, far out of sight between the rolling banks of cloud, he felt a sense of victory, of having aided it to freedom. And he laughed to see it escape.

Returning to earth, McGlade looked up and saw overhead the remains of several houses. He had been correct in his accusations last night. If he had gone beyond the first house, he would have discovered other survivors. But he had paid for his thoughtlessness in coin of anguish, and so he felt no guilt – for the moment. Doubtless there would be other moments such as last night, when he would curse himself, having discovered perhaps in a year's time that he was alone. Recalling the luck – the sheer size of the probabilities stacked against his own survival – he knew that this far into the disaster, the chances of finding someone like himself were very slender.

In order to divert his mind from such black thoughts, he worked on breaking off a solid branch from the hedge. It was a good, solid wood, ideal for a throwing stick. Such a tool would be useful for throwing at birds and small mammals (read, rats). If the majority of houses lasted as long as his past abode, then he could no longer rely on scavenging for food. He would have to go back to nature. He smiled ruefully at this conclusion. For the past ten years he had been meaning to spend his holidays living rough, perhaps with the concession of a sleeping bag, in a hut in the woods, living on what he could pick and snare, lighting his fires with a firebow. But – of course – he had never gotten around to it. Now, he grimly added, he had better, or else die. No melodrama. Simple fact.

After a long struggle, he freed the branch, and began trimming it with his key-ring penknife. He was careful to favour the blade: for all he knew this might be the last artefact of the machine age he would ever handle.

Once the stick was trimmed, he began practicing with it, throwing it

against the side of the hedge as it turned the corner vertically to follow the border of the garden. He had used a throwing stick as a boy, when he had been the scourge of the countryside. Nothing moved that didn't bring down his swiftly-flung stick. His grandfather had taught him all the tricks of its use, as well as the peripheral skills of how to prepare his catches for the table. Black-birds and thrushes had been particular delicacies to enrich the family table.

He laughed to see his latest efforts, a mere shadow of his skill as a boy. But he knew that pinpoint accuracy was unnecessary. His stick was 18 inches long; when thrown, it revolved, thus making it hit a target area with a diameter of three feet – more than enough for any bird or similar creature. No doubt, egged on by hunger and a few misses, his eye and hand would coordinate as of old.

He had spent the whole morning on the hedge, occasionally sinking through it up to his knees. He now decided to be off. With his list fixed firmly in mind, he knew that his best

*... he could sit
cross-legged like a
fakir and meditate
until death claimed
him.'*

course was to head for town and loot the sportshop for climbing gear. Also, he stood the best chance of meeting survivors if he headed in that direction – or so he hoped.

He donned his ponchos which were only slightly drier than when he had spread them to dry. He coiled his rope over his shoulder so that the 'grapnel' or wardrobe rail hung down behind, and stuck the throwing stick through his belt to leave his hands free for climbing.

Using the hedge that led upward, he came to what had been the back of the bungalow. All that remained was a narrow ledge of brickwork. He pulled himself up onto it and rested until he had his breath back. Then he shuffled along it until he came to the corner of the house where the wall rose upwards at an angle of about 70° – this was because the house had not been built with one wall facing due north, the direction McGlade now considered as 'up', rather like the lines of longitude on a globe.

The wind gusted at him as he found himself more exposed in this new position. The sheets of mist

and cloud that had obscured the sun for so long began a more frantic dance, but not once did he see the blue of the sky. He looked down at his hedge where he had exercised himself back into high spirits – if only he had the self-control of a hermit, he could sit cross-legged like a fakir and meditate until death claimed him. But he knew that such a course was impossible for his active nature. In order to remove temptation utterly, he stood up and began mapping out hand- and footholds for his climb up the remains of the wall.

He took a deep breath and began to climb.

It proved to be a waking nightmare, but he pulled himself through another hedge and found himself with an abyss to his left and the smooth tarmac of a footpath to his right. A few feet above his head was the kerb, and the camber of the road spanned 30 feet between it and the higher kerb. Above that again was another footpath, bounded by a low retaining wall, through which were thrust the roots of ancient trees.

For the first time since the disaster, McGlade recognized his surroundings: he had often passed this road with this section of wall, noticing how it had been broken as the main arterial road descended inch by inch each year. Only the firm roots of the trees prevented the road from being eroded down the mountainside.

McGlade peered up at the trees that still stood. Recalling the mudslides, he guessed that only the overhang of the mountain had kept this terrain from being swept naked to the rock by the rampaging oceans loosed by gravity's infidelity. He thought briefly of climbing until he reached the clifftop, in order to witness the destruction, to see the naked rock of the mountains rise above him, scoured of soil, but perhaps littered with Arctic moraine, the remnants of icebergs that would take months to melt, and which were probably the source of cool air mixing with warmer air to produce the heavy cloud cover.

Dismissing the prospect overhead, he set off towards town, using the hedge as a walkway, sometimes as a staircase that followed the twists of the road that in turn followed the contours of the hillside.

His first major obstacle was a side road: it plunged away into the mists below. He hung his rope and rail did service and he swung across to land in another prickly hedge. This hedge was looser than the others, and he had to resort to the rope, using it to swing from tree to tree that grew out from the hedge. He had a breathing space on each tree and he climbed

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out each one, hoping to flush out a bird. Only when one flew up from under his feet, did he recognize the flaw in his plan: if he knocked the bird senseless, it would fall and be of no use to him. He was disappointed, but he promised himself a bow with arrows on a line to get round this hitch.

Beneath him he recognized the cultivated contours of the golf course. Once the clouds almost cleared and he could see the whole of the golf course and beyond – to the far side of the estuary, to the hills beyond and to the mountains beyond them. He closed his eyes against the view; he had always prided himself on his head for heights, but this was too much. If he fell, he would probably fall for 30 or 40 miles before he hit the mountains, and then he would roll up the peaks and fall and fall and fall – until – what? the Equator?

The thought was both enervating and invigorating.

He struggled on past the golf course and came to another side road. Beyond this, the road turned and he was faced with the prospect

revenge.

Fighting his way through the fruit-drifts, he found it impossible to reach any of the rooms behind the shop. The weight of stuff was too much to even countenance the thought of excavating it in the hope of finding survivors.

He limited himself to choosing some unbruised fruit, filling a carrier bag with it, to which he added a loaf, some butter and a few tins of cooked meat. Looking for something to drink, he discovered a carton of milk, which, when tasted, proved to be unspoilt. He added it to his spoils and climbed out.

He continued on until he reached the next building in the terrace, a pub. He found the front door open. He dropped into the dim foyer out of the wind, where he rested and ate.

He wasted no time in digesting his meal, but immediately climbed out and resumed his journey. He guessed he had about eight hours of daylight left and he wanted to be at the sportshop he had in mind before dark. About three and a half miles to go.

His next big obstacle was impassable: a major road junction too wide for his rope to cross. His only route lay down the face of the cliff, climbing down suburban gardens until he came to the other main route into the town.

Having safely reached the lower road, he found it easier to travel along. It was more industrial and had high warehouse walls along the side he walked. It was here that he met his first fellow survivor.

Sauntering along a level stretch of building fronts, he was eating an apple to quench his constant thirst. The clouds were thinner and the afternoon sun gave them a sparkle for the first time since the disaster. He was looking forward to seeing the sun again.

He heard someone calling. He looked up: almost directly overhead he saw a face at a window. It was an old man or woman, he couldn't be sure which.

The voice, disembodied with distance, asked him to help. McGlade called, 'Have you any rope?' When the voice replied no, McGlade called back, 'Then how can I reach you? How can I help you?'

'Have you any food?'

McGlade held up the half-empty bag, 'Just this.'

'You'll have to help me; I can't get down,' wailed the voice.

'But I can't get up,' whispered McGlade, walking away backwards, his arms outstretched in the pose when he had shown his carrier bag.

When the voice called him back, he called, 'I'll get some rope and come back. I promise.'

'His next big obstacle was impassable.'

of climbing a series of smooth facades of shops at an angle of about 30°.

He came to a greengrocer shop. The plateglass window was completely smashed, and he entered it easily, leaving his rope as an exit route.

At the 'floor' of the shop, the back wall where all the fruit had been displayed, he found the body of a large, adult chimpanzee. His first glimpse of it was frightening, but once he was assured that it was dead, he recalled that the Zoo was only a mile or so up the road. Had the ape escaped and subsequently had it wandered here? or had it fallen here? landing on a bier of fruit. If apes believed in the sort of afterlife envisaged by primitive men, then this ape would never run short of provisions.

The more McGlade pondered the ape, the more relieved he was that it was dead. He had seen this creature in the Zoo. Any animal living in such conditions had to be deranged by its environment. It would have been highly ironic if he had been killed by the ape to appease its sense of

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Ocean Stream—Johnston

But the voice wailed on and on long after McGlade had stopped hearing it with his physical senses.

And now he began to encounter corpses, as if people had panicked and had tried jumping out of burning buildings, or had tried scaling the street without the minimal aid of a rope. He encountered overturned vehicles of every description, like beetles upturned on the side of the warehouses. Scorch marks marred a lot of them. McGlade mused that if the rain had not been so constant, then the fires would have spread. Most of the vehicles contained corpses, but some were empty, with doors open. Of the corpses in the cars, most had died of injury and shock. Some he found outside cars, he guessed had crawled out, looking for aid despite their terrible injuries. If the rain had not obliterated their bloody tracks, many would have shown that they had crawled to the edge of the buildings and fallen over.

McGlade found himself unmoved at this carnage: after the bodies on the bus, nothing could evoke much of a reaction from him. What he found more disturbing was the state of some of the buildings: landslips had shown the precariousness of manmade structures; he encountered great gaps where sewers were exposed; he guessed that they had emptied their fluid into the topsoil, forming mud which undermined the surrounding buildings. Something else was more distressing: some of the bodies had been investigated by carrion-eaters. For some reason, he was sure that whatever had broken open some of the corpses had not been dogs; if it had been dogs, then he would have expected to find a pack of them lolling about, guarding their food.

He wondered if some other animal, perhaps a lion or a tiger, had escaped from the Zoo. That would explain why he had seen no other survivors. When he dwelt on this, however, he came to the conclusion that each street reduced each bloc of buildings to an island: only the most courageous or the most foolhardy would attempt crossing the gulfs that separated each living area. It was ironic that streets, the communications network of a city, now kept the majority of people isolated.

Each time McGlade came to an intersection on the route he was following, it was a separate, but inevitably monotonous, set of adventures merely to scramble across with skin still intact, to lie face down, panting, until the will to live reasserted itself shakily, urging him away from the abyss that would so quickly end his present travails. He had lost

count of each 'last effort' that secured safety. The animal in his limbs and lungs refused to die.

McGlade reached the city centre by sunset. By now he had seen buildings collapse above him, raining outward in an avalanche of rubble, sweeping past like a lethal curtain trying to shut out the night. One mammoth rumble – the worst of all – seemed to have no visible counterpart. He guessed, looking back the way he had travelled, that something behind him had precipitated, leaving him with no return. Unhappily, he recalled his promise to the old man or woman. Circumstances had decreed it to be a broken promise.

As he looked back into the dusk, he thought he saw something moving behind him. Something vaguely pale, quite large, but also quite far away.

Then he heard the shots. He dropped against the shop-front he stood on, wriggling behind a jutting bay-window which afforded him some cover. The shots rang out in rapid succession. 'Now', he muttered,

*'With no rain
during the night,
the blood showed
tracks leading
away . . .'*

'they sound like shots fired in anger. If they had been fired to attract attention, then they would have been more widely spaced.' From its sound, he guessed it to be a high-powered rifle, and he found himself quite content to lie low until it got as dark as it would get in mid-summer.

When he felt safe enough, he rose and padded away. He holed up for the night in the outside foyer of a clothes shop. It would have been easy to climb inside and be more comfortable, but he wanted to sleep lightly, in case he should be found either by the gunman or the thing he had glimpsed.

The rising sun found McGlade doing pressups to get his blood moving. He longed for a cup of scalding black coffee, the first regret he had had for the passing of civilisation.

All through the short night, his sleep had been broken by the noise of collapsing buildings. First it would be a single wall, followed by the slither of masonry as the wall gathered momentum through other walls until a full scale avalanche was

tearing strips from the network of the city. Even as he finished his fiftieth pressup, another avalanche rocked his level. He had grown accustomed to it, the way a predator is accustomed to squealing brakes: a danger sound only when you're in front of the oncoming vehicle.

He slaked his thirst with the last of the fruit and climbed cautiously out. He set off towards his goal, alert for any signs of untoward activity.

Before long, he found someone who had been newly killed. Their face and torso had been stripped of meat, and the blood was barely dry. McGlade cautiously inspected the grisly remains. With no rain during the night, the blood showed tracks leading away from it. McGlade couldn't decide what kind of an animal it had been, except that it had been large. Undoubtedly an escapee from the Zoo.

More cautious than ever, McGlade finally reached his goal of the sportshop. Luckily it was on a street facing roughly north. Sitting on the plate glass window, looking down through his own reflection, he could descry the tumbled shelves and counters. What he saw changed his plans.

Originally, he had planned kitting himself out with all the mountaineering gear that he could carry, but yesterday's experience of travelling four miles in about nine hours had taught him that he could never live under such circumstances. And then the avalanches seemed to be growing more numerous by the hour.

Plus: he had seen no wildlife. The birds were silent in the face of all the thunder of falling masonry. His throwing stick was quite useless.

But apart from these considerations, his plans were changed by what he saw in the shop.

It was a hang glider.

It was probably the only one they had, and even then it was really only used as a display to attract customers, hopefully converting them from window-shoppers to money-spending customers. It sat astride the rubble of the shop, suspended from the ceiling, like a gaudy, gawky rook on its untidy nest of sticks.

McGlade tried to stop his pulse from racing; he tried to blot out from his memory the scrap of blanket, but failed, and then revelled in seeing it beat free from the cliff-face, borne free from tricky currents into a serene, upward tide. He had watched it, urging it on, praying that it should succeed, never thinking that within 24 hours he would be faced with the same temptation.

To give himself time to think, McGlade went up the street to a

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shop to look for something to eat. He wasn't hungry – the thought of flight took his appetite away with excitement that was close to titillation – but he filled a small bag with a few tins. Climbing out again, he saw a movement down the street that caused him to duck back out of sight.

Raising himself to peep out, McGlade found his eyes playing tricks on him. At first, due to distance and the surrounding strangeness of perpendicular streets, he took it to be large white dog, something like an Old English Sheepdog. Then realization slammed home, and he sank weakly back.

It was a polar bear.

Whether it was one of the pair in the Zoo, or whether (very, very unlikely, he thought, his mind racing wildly) it had survived the journey from the Arctic, he had no way of knowing. All he could think of was that after all the rain of the past few days, the newest scent would belong to him.

He retreated to the back of the shop, praying that it wouldn't pick up his scent – he had no idea if they had a good sense of smell, anyway. He wondered if it would be nimble enough to reach him here in the shop. It seemed nimble enough to get around in the city so far.

After an agonizing ten minutes, he heard the beast pass by. If it smelt him, it paid no heed.

After another ten minutes, McGlade looked out. The bear was gone. He climbed out and returned to the sportshop with his mind firmly made up.

As he set to work retrieving the hang-glider, his mind worked over this first reaction on finding himself alive. On waking in the tree, and learning his predicament, he had been relieved to be alone. At the same time he felt the burden of loneliness and would probably jump at the chance of finding a fellow survivor to team-up with. However, meeting another survivor meant responsibility, and McGlade felt exhilarated at the thought of being alone. He had never thought it out before, but he had always been a lone wolf forced to run with a pack, trammelled by society, an existential agonist.

But up until now, he had had no clear plan for the future. He had been disturbed at this and had worked hard at forcing himself to come to grips with the new realities of his world. At the time when he had felt confident about facing his new world, he had realized that Death would be never more than an edge away: a fall, a sprained ankle, meant death from exposure within days. And then there was the

general principle that disease always follows hard on the heels of other disasters, whether they be war, famine or earthquake. The only protection so far was that he had had no contact with anybody.

So – where did he go from here?

His answer was now unequivocal. He had to go down to the sea.

He knew nothing about sailing, very little about fishing, but he did know that whole peoples could survive in such an environment. He had never known of a community who could exist completely on a cliff-side, no matter how extensive the cliff. His only hope, therefore, was to find his way down to Ocean Stream.

He felt no happier for coming to this conclusion, but he set about realizing his plan. He dismantled the hang-glider without difficulty and brought it up to the foyer. Among the debris in the shop he had no difficulty in quickly finding suitable clothes: he helped himself to a wet-suit, a tracksuit and a heavy, waterproof outfit. He chose heavy walking boots and set aside several pairs of sneakers; he added to his supplies a compass, a helmet and goggles, several changes of socks and thermal underwear, some fishing tackle, a few knives and a whetstone. He longed to take a cross-bow, decided against it because of its weight, then changed his mind and took it anyway. He added a few coils of rope, planning to jettison them if they proved to be too heavy.

He donned his three sets of clothes, his pack and his crossbow. He had left things behind, but he knew if he stayed too long, he would back out from his venture.

Once he had the hang-glider assembled there was nothing else for it.

He walked with it to the end of the street, so that he faced into the wind. It hummed through the rigging and he felt a sense of nostalgia roll over him, mingled with memories of his wife. She had died in a hang-gliding accident shortly after he had talked to her of a trial separation.

He edged closer to the edge and felt the timbre of the wind change. It's voice ravaged for him to trust himself to its caprices. He frowned down into the abyss, thinking that he had chosen an elaborate way to commit suicide. He stepped back, conscious that nothing could induce him to step over the edge.

He grinned despite his fear. If only the bear would return; or if only the building would shake with the approach of an avalanche. Or if only the gunman would appear.

He needed a boost, something to heat his blood. A hand to hold as he went over the edge.

He turned as if to walk away, then just as suddenly turned and walked back again, as if he had feigned to fool his own survival-instinct. In the end he had needed no steeling of the nerves. It was a nonchalant suicide.

The wind plucked at him as if trying to tear him from his wings. The vane was filled with lift and suddenly he had risen above the street. He headed for the dense cloud that cloaked the sun.

Downraughts tapped him on the shoulder as if to remind him he was only here for as long as he was wanted. He smiled and hoped he wouldn't overstay his welcome. He rose out and up, rising, rising, rising, through the cloud, through the rose-iris of the sky.

Suddenly he surfaced from the cloud, with no idea how far out he was. The sky was blue, a blue so serene that it brought a lump to his throat. Tears streamed from beneath his goggles and he smiled beneath the scarf that covered his face.

The sun shone beneath him.

And beneath that again, he saw the most vibrant rainbow ever. It was a solid sector of the horizon, filling the whole southern sky. And that was his goal, for it was Ocean Stream.

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Jim Johnston is 27 years old. He is married and works as a part-time library assistant and part-time janitor. His previous occupations include apprentice bricklayer and daredevil bank teller (or is it the other way round?).

His interests range from anthropology, zoology, art, literature to 'Disneytime'. His top three sf authors include: John T. Sladek, Philip Jose Farmer and J. G. Ballard, none of whom know this.

His present writing output at the moment consists of drafts for a mythopoetic novel and a more modest novel, both of which spring from an overlying, personalized mythos.

Underpass

by Edward Mackin

The thunder-storm was at its height when Jasper Higget drove through the new underpass. It cut the flyover at an angle, debouching on Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre, and it was from this end that the ball lightning came lolloping in. The gleamingly bright globular phenomenon reached the car just as Jasper pressed on the accelerator. It seemed to circle about him in a menacing fashion, and Jasper realised with a shock that he wasn't moving although the wheels were still rotating. A colourful firework display hit his car bonnet, and there was a distinct whiff of heavy ozonisation.

'Oh, very pretty!' Jasper said, vaguely hoping to propitiate whatever forces were toying with him, although he wasn't feeling too happy about the situation. He'd never seen ball lightning before, if that's what it was, and he felt he could live quite adequately for the rest of his life without ever seeing it again.

Not that he expected to live much longer in the circumstances. Sad, because he had rather hoped for something in the nature of a State Funeral when he finally shuffled off this mortal coil. Lavish, anyway. At the moment it looked as though it was going to be a cheap cremation job.

He felt relieved when the ball suddenly vanished at some point on the tiled wall to his left; but that was when he noticed the foot-wide black band that took in the walls, roof and rubber-block roadway. It never seemed to be quite where he looked; but it was there all right. Space black, vibrant, and threatening.

'Oh, boy!' he said.

He shifted his gaze to the windscreen, and was surprised that it hadn't been shattered. Running across the glass was a peculiar geometrical pattern like an enormously involved and constantly changing three-dimensional graph. He found that he couldn't quite bring it into focus. Like the sinister black band it was never precisely anywhere, just something at the very periphery of vision, continually shifting under direct scrutiny. Jasper shook his head to clear it without clearing his brain of the suspicion that maybe the phenomena was simply illusion; but he was still uncomfortably aware of it.

'Poppycock!' he said, bravely, just as the car shot forward as though released from a catapult.

He had a slight impression of passing through something almost tangible, and then he was pulling up outside of what should have been the Roe Street exit by the Royal Court Theatre. Instead, he found himself on a piece of derelict land, which he recognised as being at the junction of Upper Parliament Street and Smithdown Lane, a couple of miles due East of where he should have been.

He bailed out and looked around. No sign of the underpass, naturally, only the ugly detritus of our shabby civilisation, like a couple of dirty old box-spring mattresses, and a busted refrigerator. He

interrogated this, hardly aware of the heavy rain.

'What's going on?' he inquired, booting the side of the ice-box, which gaped vacantly back at him; but no explanation was forthcoming.

He climbed into the car again and drove off over the uneven terrain onto the main road. A group of kids threw bricks at him, which was not unusual for the area. Happily, their aim needed improving, and he got away with a mere dent in the boot.

That wasn't the end of it. On three consecutive days he was obliged to use the same underpass from town, and on each occasion the ominous black band appeared in conjunction with the strange pattern sliding across his windscreen and vanishing just as the car shot forward after being held momentarily by this giant force. Then he was bursting through a paper hoop, which is what it felt like.

On Tuesday he found himself deposited just outside of the Deaf and Dumb Institute in Princes Road. Wednesday found him on the Dock Road, North of the Mersey Tunnel, heading towards Bootle. Thursday's trick was a peach. He was left high and dry on the Landing Stage at the Pier Head, in the enclosed part near the Dublin boat. The police wanted to know how he'd got in and what he was doing there anyway. He didn't know. This time he was breathalysed, and then accused of drug-taking; but the fuzz finally gave up on this and he was told to push off.

Jasper, thinking about it, decided that a pattern had begun to emerge. He bought a street map of the whole area, and drew a circle on it with the diabolical underpass as the centre. Then he ruled in several lines from the underpass to where he'd been dumped so unexpectedly. He worked out that there was approximately 15 degrees between each destination point, and he was therefore able by simple projection to mark in the radii indicating any future trips he might make from the underpass.

He took his map along to the bridewell, which was just a stonethrow from that section of the flyover. He spread the map across the desk in front of the Duty Sergeant. The latter was far from co-operative. He had more than a touch of indigestion that morning. Nothing unusual for him; but this particular morning he had forgotten his tablets.

He glowered at Jasper, regarding him with a very jaundiced eye indeed. 'What the hell is this, and what d'you want anyway?' he inquired. 'Sir,' he added reluctantly and with some effort.

Jasper ignored the man's boorishness, and traced the pencilled-in radii on the map from the underpass to where he had found himself on each occasion. 'Black hole phenomena,' he explained, radiating out from this underpass. Every time I negotiate the tunnelway I find myself miles away from the exit. Why just me, you might legiti-



mately ask, and I am assuming that no-one else has reported such an experience. Right?' The sergeant sighed, but didn't reply. 'The reason why is simply that my car has been keyed in to the phenomena. The evidence is there on my windscreen, although it doesn't appear until the black band materialises in the underpass. So, if you will allow me to conduct you through the underpass in my car you can experience it for yourself. It will require a certain courage, of course.' He folded the map up. 'I think I forgot to mention how it all began,' he added. 'Ball lightning. It all started with ball lightning. A really frightening phenomenon, I assure you.'

The sergeant thumped his chest, and wondered if he could send someone out for a box of those tablets. Then he turned his attention to the lunatic in front of him. 'What are you trying to tell me, sir?' he asked. 'This is not some kind of elaborate leg-pull is it? If it is,' he warned, 'I shall probably smash your face in, and hang the consequences . . . sir.'

Jasper merely raised an eyebrow. It took more than that to faze him. 'I am,' he said, 'pointing out that your underpass has gone rogue. It has been depositing me in unexpected places around the city; but I have discovered that there is a pattern. You should be able to see this from the radii I have drawn in on this street map.' He offered it to the sergeant who took it, folded it again and stuck it in Jasper's top pocket.

'First of all, son,' he said, 'it is not *my* underpass, and I suggest that your extraordinary experiences, which you rightly surmise have not been reported by anyone else, take place in your head. Even if it were true, at this moment in time, as they say, I just don't care. Indigestion, you see, makes you misanthropic. You can look that word up at your leisure; but it simply means that I hate people. All people, but you in particular. Now get out of here before I have you charged with something or other like loitering with intent.'

Jasper Higget was not a fellow to give up that easily. He spread the map out again on the desk

Underpass—Mackin

top, anchoring it with the heavy Charge book while the sergeant watched in stunned disbelief.

'Sefton Park Review Field,' he said, tracing one of the lines from the underpass out beyond Ullet Road. 'One degree further South and it could have been the Central Palmhouse, and lots of broken glass.'

'Is that a fact?' said the sergeant, writing down a few details on a slip of paper like: *Age about 25. Medium height. Hair brown. Eyes grey green. Tattoo on back of left hand.* 'What's that tattoo on your left hand?' he asked. 'Those are hearts, aren't they?'

Jasper nodded. 'That was Miriam,' he said. 'It was a very intense relationship; but she packed me in to enter a nunnery.'

'I'm not surprised,' the sergeant observed, pointedly. He wrote down *Slight local accent.* Every detail counted. After all, the fellow might have escaped from somewhere. 'Do you have an address?' he inquired.

'Just a temporary one,' Jasper told him. 'I'm in the process of moving. Any inquiries you may wish to make should be directed to the Y.M.C.A., Mount Pleasant. That is my new temporary address.'

The sergeant wrote down *No fixed address* and underlined it. 'What do you do for a living?' he asked.

'I'm a salesman,' Jasper told him. 'But I'm waiting for a teaching post.'

'Heaven help us!' the sergeant said. 'What do you sell?'

'Crackers,' Jasper said.

The Desk Sergeant nodded. 'That figures,' he said.

'Christmas Crackers,' Jasper amplified. 'Not very successfully,' he added.

'I'm surprised,' the sergeant told him. 'You've got persistence. I'll give you that.' He folded the map up once more and offered it to Jasper. 'No doubt you'll be on your way now, sir? May I suggest that you avoid the underpass if it proves so troublesome and try the long way round via Whitechapel and Lord Street?'

Jasper put the map away and frowned at the officer. He tapped his teeth reflectively. 'That's what did it you know,' he said. 'All that electrical power in the ball lightning. It must have created a black-hole situation, and I happened to be right there in the middle of it, at the eye of the storm you might say. Somehow I've been keyed into the phenomena. So there you are. Every time I go through that underpass it recognises me and I end up somewhere else. Just the same, I think I'll go through there just once more. No crummy underpass is going to put the block on me. I intend to try an experiment.' He suddenly leant over the desk and shook the sergeant's nerveless hand. 'Goodbye,' he said. 'We may never meet again. I am going into uncharted territory, so to speak. It could prove dangerous, even fatal.' He went out.

'I should be so lucky,' the Desk Sergeant said, sardonically. He thumped his chest again as

another pang struck him. He made up his mind to shove the desk at the first copper to poke his helmet into the room, and go out and get those tablets. As it happened the first copper proved to be Policewoman Josie Jones, who was still a bit uncertain about procedure. However, the sergeant was desperate. 'Man the desk, girl,' he said, with knives cutting into his solar plexus. 'I have to go out for a few minutes.' This was why he happened to be in the vicinity of the underpass when the explosion occurred.

Jasper had entered the underpass at a very slow speed, and a little fearfully. He was expecting to be keyed in to the black band phenomenon at any moment. Side-glancing apprehensively he saw it appear simultaneously with the elusive windscreen pattern running across the glass, but never quite where his eyes were directed. Immediately, he swung into his experiment as he thought of it, reversing the car and accelerating. The result was quite shocking and totally unexpected.

He had a momentary vision of a mirror image of the car, and then he was being turned and twisted through some alien dimension so that at one point he could see in all directions at once, and then there was a kind of silent explosion and he was hurled forth the way he had come.

It wasn't a silent explosion as far as the rest of the neighbourhood was concerned. The Desk Sergeant, who answered to the name of Jack Pratt, and suffered for it, was so shocked that he dropped his precious tablets. There was a crowd forming near the entrance to the underpass. He made his ponderous way there and pushed and shoved his way through the jostling throng.

They were gathered round an ancient VW which was lying on its hubs. Emerging from one side of it, with his hair over his eyes, and gasping slightly was Jasper Higget.

'Hello, sergeant,' the young man said. 'I don't think I'll be using that underpass again.'

Sergeant Pratt, glancing along the underpass noted the fallen tiles and the heap of rubble. 'I don't think anyone will,' he said. He helped Jasper out and as he did so he observed that the VW had left-hand drive. 'Left-hand drive,' he said. 'That's looking for trouble.'

'I had right-hand drive when I went in,' Jasper told him. 'Look.' He exhibited the back of his left hand. 'Do you recollect the tattoo?' The sergeant nodded, frowning. 'It is now on the back of my right hand.' Jasper showed him. 'In fact I have been turned completely round. So has the car. It could have been worse, though, I suppose. I mean, I could have been turned inside out. You know, all my lights, liver and general plumbing on public view and that. Nasty.'

Sergeant Pratt's indigestion hit him. 'Don't,' he said, beating his chest. 'I'd rather not think about it.'

'It's funny, you know,' Jasper said, cheerfully; 'but I feel positively elated. A symptom of shock, I suppose. Here, I have something that might help

Fiction

you.' He proffered a box with a mass of strange heiroglyphics on it. 'The print appears to be back-to-front,' he said. 'I expect the insurance disc and everything else will be the same. There's a thought, eh?'

'*aisengaM fo kLiM,*' the sergeant read. 'What the devil's that?'

'Milk of Magnesia, mirror-fashion. Talk about Alice Through The Looking-Glass. Are you all wrong way round, or am I?'

The sergeant thrust the tablets back at him. 'Look,' he said, foreseeing some of the immense complications of a written report, 'just forget you ever saw me. I have my promotion to think of. I'm not supposed to be here, anyway.'

Jasper Higget watched him depart at speed as

the ambulance came round the corner from Whitechapel. A depressing thought hit him and he pulled out his wallet, trying the wrong side of his coat with the wrong hand, initially. The five-pound note and the three one-pound notes, which was what remained of his pay had suddenly become useless currency. Joke money, Jasper thought, bitterly. Who the hell was going to accept a note bearing the cryptic legend DNALGNE FO KNAB? Then there was his credit card, to say nothing of all those cracker motos ... Life had suddenly become very complicated.

'Oh boy!' he said, as they lifted him onto the stretcher. 'Oh boy, oh boy!'

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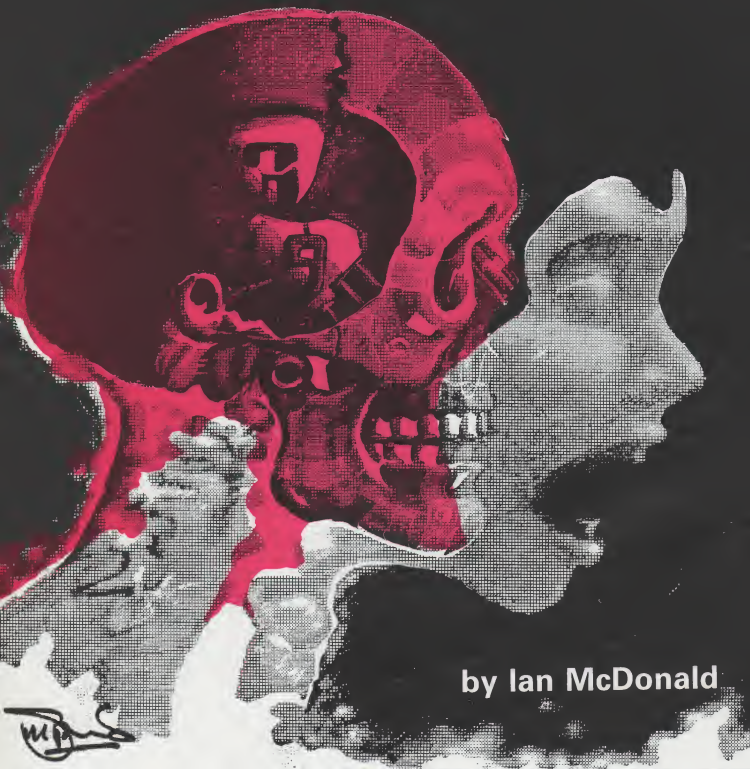
Edward Mackin began writing SF more years ago than he cares to remember, and contributed to most of the magazines current at the time. He concentrated mainly on humour such as the Hek Belov series, which ran through various magazines over a period of maybe ten years, totalling about 30 short stories and a 20,000 words novelette. A few of his tales found

their way into anthologies, two of them American. He has also had 11 plays broadcast over Radio 4; but none of them, alas, science-fiction. Is vastly intrigued by the fact that SF art has lately outstripped the practitioners of the mere word, and in the movie industry, at least, writers are beginning to take their cues from the artists, instead of the other way round.



THE ISLANDS OF THE DEAD

Paper-lanterned corpse-boats brought us across the dark waters to Thanos. As we drew near to the shore I became aware of a waltz playing and figures clad in evening dress gliding beneath the olive trees. I strained to see if I could recognise any particular dancer, but the light was fading fast now and people suddenly surged around me, pressing close for a view of the shore and herding me back against the bulkhead. Of course. We were all eager, we living.



by Ian McDonald

Fiction

Men dressed in smart matelot costumes caught ropes and fastened them to bollards. With a roar of the engines our captain brought us in alongside the pier. The sailors ran out a gangplank and the impatient passengers fairly boiled onto the dusty stone pier. I could understand their impatience on this one night of the year. But I took my time and straightened my tie and with delicate tugs aligned my cuffs and waited until the press of bodies had passed. Then I stepped down onto the pier, onto the Island of the Dead.

A sloe-eyed girl waited there, greeting me with a smile. 'Fine evening,' I remarked and passed by.

'One moment, sir...' I turned back, puzzled. 'Your card sir, they insist.' To those in their employ, the dead are always 'They'.

I produced the invitation card from my dinner jacket pocket and handed it to the girl, noting with distaste the designs from the 'Danse Macabre' that embellished its border.

How the dead love their little jokes! Like the name they gave to the straight of water between their island and the mainland: Acheron. And the corpse-boat that ferried us here: Charon. And the Island of the Dead itself: Thanos. I suppose the dead may be permitted their moments of self-mockery, for they have all passed through that final, grim mockery-to-self, death.

But the night was fine and gay and the dead waltzed with the living under the olives that grew by the side of Acheron. And along the streets of the crumbled leper village stood bright booths and pavilions all lit by delicate paper lanterns that rustled in the night air. I saw two people sitting hand in hand by a table under a cracked wall through which a mimosa grew. On the table, a thick candle and bottle of wine. I saw a band playing from a podium set on the demolished upper floor of a shop. The faded wooden sign read 'Fish' in Greek and people Charleston in the street beneath it.

A girl pushed her way through a crowd of laughing partygoers and caught hold of my arm.

'Excuse me,' she giggled and looked into my eyes. I could see from her gaze that she was dead.

'You looking?' she drawled.

'Yes.'

'Ahhh, but you've no drink. Oh dear.' She raised an arm. 'Waiter, drinkie.' A dead waiter came over to me and I took a glass from his tray.

'Now, excuse me ...' I unfas-

tened her hand from my sleeve and hurried on into the party. She was a swap. I could tell it from her eyes. The dead do enjoy playing their games. Like dressing up in another person's body for the night.

Fireworks began to burst high over the old fortifications and people oohed and ahhed as they do. The living, of course. Such things are beneath the dignity of the dead. I stopped by a ruined wall to take a sip from my drink and watch the spectacle. A man stood beside me. He raised his glass.

'Merry All Hallows to you.'

Rockets burst in red and blue.

'What brings you here?' I asked.

'What do you think? Father, actually. Came here, oh, eight years back when he found he had ... you know. Rather have the Scanner Slug take him than that, and who can blame him? He was one of the first you know, and I've been here to see him every Hallow's Eve since without fail. Funny thing, he looks far better dead than he ever did alive.'

I smiled politely.

'Wife,' I said 'Liver took her. Funny thing the liver, there's nothing they can really do about it. Hearts, lungs, kidneys, even brains they can cope with, but the liver; nothing. She only came this year.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Still ...'

'Family fortune got her here. Actually, it was either here or Nagarashima, you know the way the lists have filled up since this thing became fashionable, but she always loved the Mediterranean. Small fortune went into the pockets of the Thanos Foundation, but there's still enough left for me to live on in the decadence to which I'm accustomed.'

And then I saw her. In a green dress; she flitted across the busy street and up a stairway that twisted between the ruined houses.

'Excuse me, but I've just seen ...'

'Just seen her? I say, good luck to you! Bon chance!' I climbed the rotting staircase as quickly as I dared and came out into a courtyard where cypress trees grew. There were tables beneath the trees at which people sat talking and drinking wine together.

I looked about me but there was no sign of her. I stopped an old woman by touching her arm and asked if she had seen a young lady in a green dress, but the old woman shook her head slowly, sadly and passed on down the stairway.

'As the night passed I worked my way through the rings of fortifications to the top of the island. I did so unconsciously, some mystic magnetism drawing me upward. I passed through tavernas and bier cellars and barbeques, through fox-

trot and gavotte and jive, through alcohol and tobacco and opium, through people dressed in garish fashions and in classic evening wear and in casual nakedness. But I did not find her.

I would stop these people and ask them the same question, 'Have you seen a young woman in a green dress?' Some shook their heads and returned to their partying, others nodded and pointed me to an alley or a staircase or a cloister. But I did not find her.

Toward midnight, the traditional witching hour on this All Hallow's Eve when the festivities rose to their most frenzied, I thought I saw her running down the steps to the Charnel House. I called her name but she did not stop and when I followed I found the Charnel House empty.

As empty as any Charnel House can ever be. Another of the dead's morbid little jokes, but the skulls that line the floodlit pit are not theirs. Their bodies lie in anabiotic suspension in necropolises cut deep into the underpinnings of Thanos. These bones are those of the humble lepers who owned this island long before the truly dead took it for themselves.

'Ahh, the gleam of polished ivory, so beautiful,' a voice said behind me. I turned. A dead woman stood at my shoulder. She paid me little regard but stared, fascinated, into the pit. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were very green, very dead. They should have been dead many years ago.

'Our hold on immortality is so weak,' she whispered, 'and our world, our reality, is so tightly limited. And we may only truly live as you do on this one All Hallow's Eve.'

The air under the brick dome of the Charnel House was dry and clean, and the floodlights caught the little cracks and irregularities in the stonework. Skulls within a skull.

'But; rather this, rather my one day of fleshly life, than that ...' She nodded at the skulls. 'So truly classical, so much a part of this place. One day in the year our souls may be released from Purgatory, one day in the year the bodies of we dead are re-lit and we move amongst the living. And, with the first light of dawn we are gone, our earthly flesh back to the crypts and our souls back to the Simulator. I like that, I like its ... classicality. We are the stuff of legends, we dead.'

'Why am I telling you all this? Catharsis, maybe. Perhaps I am Cassandra, and I call across the barriers between death and life to warn you of the boredom of being dead.' She laughed at that.

'Though I wonder how much

Islands—McDonald

more boring to be Dead than just dead.'

'Tell me,' I interrupted, 'tell me, I'm looking for my wife, maybe you can help me?' So I described my wife, and I told the dead woman of how the liver had eaten away at her until the day came when she had called the Death House and two men had arrived with metal cases. They were both living, but there was something very dead about their eyes, very dead indeed. They had opened their cases and taken out the tools of their trade and injected their slug into her brain and that was all until one day I had come home and she was gone. Gone away to Thanos with the men with dead eyes. We had written at first, but then the letters had grown more irregular and had finally stopped altogether, and it was then that I had decided to come to the Islands of the Dead to find her.

The woman nodded bitterly.

'This is the way it is,' she said. 'Our lives are tinsel-bright in the islands, but we are bored, bored, bored, and bored people develop strange pastimes.'

She turned to leave, but I held her arm as she stooped to climb through the low arch.

'Have you seen her? Can you help me at all?'

The woman shook her head.

'Leave. Don't look for the living in the place of the dead. Go.'

Out on the terrace masked dancers stepped in a stately minuet beneath light-strewn trees. I pressed through them smiling and apologising for I thought I had caught a glimpse of her passing up a staircase onto the battlements. Dancers tripped and stumbled and cursed as I pushed and elbowed my way through but I reached the stone stairway just in time to see a flash of green dress vanish around a corner in the rock wall. Panting, I climbed the staircase and ran along the rampart. Puzzled revellers cleared out of my path, politely not staring.

There! I saw her round a shoulder of rock. I ran. And there she was before me, leaning on the parapet staring over the water to the hills of the mainland beyond. I stopped. I called her name once, twice, three times. She turned. I looked into her eyes. And they were not dead.

'I'm sorry,' I remember saying, 'I mistook you for someone else. I apologise.' I remember being amazed at my presence of mind in that situation. The woman looked puzzled and in that moment the sideways tilt of her head and her gentle frown reminded me achingly of her. Then the expression was gone and I looked again and she was not like her at all.

'I mistook you for my dead wife,' I said, 'I must have been following you around all night. I do hope you haven't been getting any wrong impressions about me.'

'I had noticed,' she said, 'but the dead, and the living too, for that matter, do odd things on All Hallow's Eve.' She sat herself down on the parapet and patted the stone next to her. I sat and leant back, stretching my tired limbs.

'Careful!' she said, 'There's a nasty drop back there. It would never do if there was a real death here.'

I laughed at that and relaxed and there was a long, comfortable silence.

'The Venetians built this place', she said after a while, looking up at the sheer stone walls of the bastion that bulked from the rock above us. 'They built it to keep an eye on the Turkish pirates who played hell with their trading routes. Didn't do them any good, because the Turks took it off them some time after the fall of Byzantium and kept it so that they could keep an eye on the Venetian pirates who were playing hell with the trading routes. Held it up until

***'It wasn't cheap,
this slug in my
brain . . .'***

the end of the First World War when the Greek nation was reformed, and by that time piracy on anyone's trade routes was out of fashion and even stout Venetian masonry was no match for ten-inch naval guns.'

She cupped her hands around her knees and leant back, looking up beyond the crumbled fortress to the autumn constellations.

'Then the new Greek Government designated it a leper colony. Strange to think that there were such things as lepers in a civilized country like Greece until half a century or so ago. They used to bring them here from all over the Aegean. Sort of sad, I think. The last sight of the wider world they saw was the little harbour of Aghios Georgios as the boat took them across to the island. And they would be put ashore and the boat would sail away and they would live there the rest of their lives. I sometimes wonder how they were received by the others when the boat went away. Perhaps with sad resignation, perhaps with joy at the coming of a new brother to their little fellowship. Somehow though, I can't see this as having

been a sad place.'

She looked at me.

'The last leper died in 1950 and the colony was closed and the island became a macabre kind of tourist attraction. Hordes of check-shorted trippers in sun-glasses and hats swarmed over it by the boat-load snapping little instamatics of the ruined village and the skulls and the tombs. That I think is sad; let the dead rest in peace.'

'Little rest for the dead,' I said, 'not after the Thanos Foundation bought the island from the Greeks. I heard that the price they paid was sufficient to re-float the foundering Greek economy.'

'I heard that too. Do you know what they called the island before the dead took it? Spiranikaos. That was its name: Spiranikaos, but the dead came and dug their necropolis deep underground and filled it with their computers and re-named it Thanos. And on one day every year, on the Greek All Hallow's Eve, they hold the Festival of the Dead and their bodies are re-lit and their souls come out of the Simulator and they walk amongst the living.'

'You sound bitter.'

'I do? Perhaps. I should be. I've been searching too.'

'Your husband?'

'No, my brother. We were very close, together we ran the business. Close, but separate, really, if you understand. Anyway, he contracted . . . you know, and he knew he had only a matter of a few months left to him. But he wasn't going to lie back in his bed in some comfortable, terrible hospice for the terminally sick and trickle away to nothing, not he. He spent his last months living in his grandly extravagant style. "Lived in style, and I'll damn well die in style too," he said, and he had style, you know. When his time came he called me to his lodge in the Andes and I saw him there on his sofa, and he looked so dreadful. But he smiled and said, "It may try to get you in the end, but not me, not me," and he tapped the side of his head and winked. "It wasn't cheap, this slug in my brain, but it won't get me. After all the things I've done in this life, I'll not have everything come apart just because I'm dead." You see, I was the organiser, but he was the one with the creative talent that made the company what it is. Then he sat up and said, "In three days they'll be back and take me to the Death House and then I'll live forever."

'And in three days they returned and put him into a suspension pod and flew him to Thanos and he was gone. At first I received letters and phone calls and reports from him and the business boomed. The

Fiction

Simulator has lines to the outside world and the dead can still work as they did in life. Being dead hadn't impaired his business acumen in the least.'

'Like Sylva Jenka, her "In This Still Life" series of tone-poems.'

'But have you noticed,' she said intently, 'how abstracted the works of the dead are becoming? I wonder, is it because their reality is just a computer simulation?'

'In one of his letters my brother told me of how he had once taken a boat out of the harbour and sailed away toward the mainland, but the nearer he drew to shore the hazier and more indistinct it became until he must have crossed some invisible barrier, and there was nothing. No boat, no sea, no town of Aghios Georgios, no body, no self. Just . . . Void. Then he looked back, wherever "back" might be, and there it was; Thanos, floating in a little bubble of air and sea and sunlight in the midst of void.'

From the battlements above drifted the vigorous sound of Greek folk music; lyra and bozouki and flute and clapping hands. It sounded wonderfully real and vital.

'Then there was a shift in the void, and he was back in the boat on the sea and the sun was shining and there were the blue hills of the mainland before.'

'He said in his letter that he must have gone past the limits of the simulation, over the edge of the world into the nothing beyond.' She looked up to the source of the lively music. Up there, people were whirling and stamping their feet and whooping in glee.

'I sometimes wonder what it's really like.'

'They say that you can do anything, be anything you wish.'

'As long as you stay within the limits of the simulation.'

'True. One freedom bought at the expense of the other. My wife told me in her letters how she spent each day: swimming and playing tennis and playing bridge and talking. She said you could drink all day and never get drunk, you could eat as much as you liked as often as you liked and never get fat. And of course, there were the wonderful, imaginary companions she could conjure up when she tired of conversing with the pick of the world's richest and finest minds. After that she stopped writing.'

'Yes, my brother stopped writing too. I can't help wondering if this dream-life is jading after a while? Perhaps the dead find their blunted appetites turning to more bizarre, more introverted pursuits?'

I remembered the dead man dressed in the woman's body who talked

to me in the ruined town. I remembered the dead woman in the Charnel House who told me that bored people develop strange pastimes. I remembered the figures waltzing under the olive trees and realized that the dead danced with the dead and the living with the living.

'We mean nothing to them,' I said. 'They live in their own world where they make their own rules and their own relationships and the love we felt for them is forgotten!'

'I began to realize that years ago,' the woman said, 'but I kept coming back each year until this All Hallow's night I met my brother and greeted him and he did not even recognise me. He looked straight through me and all the love I felt for him just poured out of me onto the ground and was gone.'

She looked around her. Her eyes were dark.

'I hate this place. It refuses to die. The lepers; they died and their past died with them and their bones and skulls became a part of the island, but the dead, the dead that don't die, they haunt this place, they hang over it like a shroud!'

'If you came here on any other day of the year, if you could slip past the smart sailors who carry machine-pistols on any other day of the year, you would find the streets empty and the courtyards deserted and the houses crumbled and still and the dust thick under the olive trees, but you would feel the presence of the dead all around you; you would hear whispers of their casual conversations and their idle small talk as they swim and sail and play their phantom games of tennis in computer simulation while their restored bodies lie in underground tombs. Except for today when they walk amongst us to remind themselves of what a real world is like! We aren't important to them any more, but our reality is! We remind them of the ghosts they truly are.'

She was quiet for a while after her outburst. Then she said quietly.

'Shall we go from this place?'

I took her gently by the arm and together we left the quiet place on the ramparts. We came to a small taverna under the branches of a cedar tree and here we sat by a private table and talked and drank the raw, resinous wine. We talked of many things and after a while we danced to a swing band and laughed a lot. We found a tiny restaurant in a disused boathouse and ate grilled red snapper straight from the spit, burning our fingers on the hot flesh. We watched jugglers and acrobats and joined hands and danced in a ring to the tune of a Greek folk dance half as old as civilization. We stood on the beach by

the embers of a dead bonfire and watched the breeze from the sea whipping the soft grey ashes away from the glowing coals beneath. We drank ouzo and watched the dark hills of the mainland grow in definition in the grey pre-dawn glow.

'Look' she said and pointed. Columns of figures were climbing to the top of the island. Bright costumes, bare skin, they wound up the twisting staircases and along the limestone cloisters and ramparts of the Venetian fortress: the dead returning to the Underworld.

We reached the stone jetty just as the first rays of the sun touched the island. The last of the dead entered the necropolis and the brass gates closed behind. I knew that last figure.

And she had once known me. But now she had returned to the land of the dead, that bone-dry landscape where she lived other lives and loved other loves. The island seemed to throb beneath my feet as the pulse of power built that would strip soul from body and send it whirling back into the Simulator while quiet machines carried the discarded flesh back to its underground chamber and gently restored it.

I blinked, shuddered, banishing the vision. The boats were arriving to ferry us back to the mainland. It was for us as it was for the ancient Greeks; only the living may return across Acheron, and only on the condition that they bring nothing back from the domain of the dead.

I looked at the woman beside me, then back at the bulk of the island. The sun was strong now and the fairy-lights in the olive trees glowed wanly.

'Let them go,' I said at length.

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Ian McDonald, born Manchester, resides Bangor, ex-psychology student, turned to writing as a direct response to the recession. Currently dole-ful. Interests are reading, Chinese food and Space Invaders. Ambition is never to wear a three piece suit.

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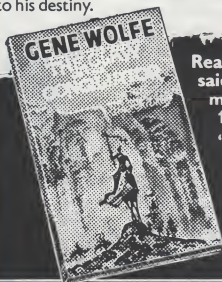
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